

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE CHALICE OF DESTINY





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
CHALICE OF DESTINY**

Jupiter, Pete and Bob follow Uncle Titus on one of his junk-buying tours around Southern California. During a brief stop over in the sleepy town of Carmine Falls, Jupiter encounters by chance, several people who have connections with his mother's side of the family. He figures that they can reveal to him secrets about his family's past. The Three Investigators take on the case, only to face with many obstacles and strange events, including having to deal with an art object worth millions of dollars.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Chalice of Destiny

*Original German text by
Kari Erloff*

*Based on characters created by
Robert Arthur*

Translated, adapted, and edited from:

Die drei ???: Kelch des Schicksals

(The Three ???: Chalice of Destiny)

by

Kari Erhoff

(2020)

Cover art by

Silvia Christoph

(2024-12-04)

Contents

- 1. A Chance Encounter**
- 2. An Eerie Discovery**
- 3. Pete in Pain**
- 4. Sunset Drive**
- 5. The Pendant**
- 6. Carmine Inn**
- 7. Breakfast at Clementine's**
- 8. Dangerous Investigations**
- 9. Pete Does Research**
- 10. Water Damage**
- 11. Something is Wrong**
- 12. Back at the Cave**
- 13. Caught Red-Handed**
- 14. Jupiter Meets Mercury**
- 15. Mercury's Story**
- 16. Where is the Key?**
- 17. Showdown at the Salvage Yard**
- 18. The Secrets About Jupiter's Family**

1. A Chance Encounter

“Hey, Uncle Titus! Do you want more of these—” That was as far as Jupiter Jones got.

A plastic bottle hit the floor, and its blue cap flew off on impact. White liquid splashed up, and Jupiter just managed to avoid contact by jumping to the side. It was an ordinary bottle of detergent, but a strong smell immediately spread through the supermarket aisle.

“Sorry,” mumbled a man in sunglasses. A milk carton, a packet of tablets and several bags of chips were already piled up on his arm. The man tried to rebalance his items, but the packet of tablets now slipped from his hands just as the detergent had earlier. The packet fell to the floor, slid away and came to rest in front of a freezer. The man groaned briefly, but then shuffled away. His steps became faster and faster.

“Stop, wait!” Jupiter’s friend Pete Crenshaw shouted to the man. “You’ve dropped something.” However, the man hurriedly headed to the counter.

“Hey!” the cashier called after the man. “Do you want me to clean up the mess by myself? In any case, please pay for your items first!”

The man hastily approached the cashier and placed all the items on the counter. “Uh... I’m in a hurry. I’ll come back another time and pay for these things.”

“No way!” the cashier told him off. “You’re not coming back here anymore. You are banned from this store!”

The man did not reply but proceeded to rush out of the store.

“What has happened here?” asked Bob Andrews in amazement, as he approached his two friends from behind.

Jupiter looked at his uncle Titus. “That man dropped the bottle just after I called you.”

Pete nodded. “That’s right. He stared at you for a moment, Mr Jones, and then the bottle slipped out of his hands.”

Uncle Titus nervously adjusted his cap—which was emblazoned with the words ‘The Jones Salvage Yard’ in red letters. Jupe had given his uncle the cap for his last birthday and he had worn it ever since on his junk-buying tours around Southern California—just like today.

“Strange,” Bob thought. With pointed fingers, he picked up the dripping bottle. A sticker on it claimed that ‘Clean Xtreme with Power Enzyme’ could remove even stubborn stains—for example from milk, blood or ice cream.

The blonde woman behind the cash register stood up. Slowly she reached for a roll of household paper. “Impossible! That guy is not entering this store anymore!”

“Do you know him?” Jupiter asked. The probability was high. Carmine Falls, the place they were in, was tiny. It was a sleepy nest with barely more than a thousand residents.

“His wife used to work here,” the cashier explained as she slowly got down and half-heartedly dabbed at the detergent with a rag. “Jolene did sloppy work and smoked in the warehouse. That’s when the boss threw her out.”

“What about the man?” asked Bob, still holding the bottle of Clean Xtreme with his fingers.

“That was Perceval Abernathy,” the cashier muttered. She wiped around in the pool of detergent in disgust. “He’s no better than his wife. The Abernathys are nothing but trouble...”

Darn, this won't do. I'll go get a mop." With that, she stomped off.

Pete looked thoughtfully towards the exit. In the meantime, the man was long gone. "Mr Abernathy seems to have been startled by your uncle," he finally said to Jupiter. "Perhaps he has mistaken him for someone else."

"Uh-huh..." Uncle Titus uttered. "Let's pay for our stuff and leave."

Moments later, the four of them left the store and headed for the car park. Parked there were two vehicles—Uncle Titus's pick-up truck, and Pete's MG. The Three Investigators helped Uncle Titus stow the shopping bags in his pick-up.

Jupiter tried to bring up the subject of Perceval Abernathy, but his uncle avoided answering him and instead changed the subject: "I have to go to Salinas today and pick up a load of household goods. If I hadn't taken a wrong turn after Bitterwater on that darn road diversion, we would be there already."

Titus Jones tucked the corners of his mouth under his enormous moustache. "We should eat something, top up the petrol tank, and then find our way to the highway. We're just wasting valuable time here."

Jupiter stopped on the pavement. "You've been nervous since we arrived here in Carmine Falls."

"Get in," Uncle Titus said unusually curtly after opening the passenger door for this nephew.

"You know that man!" Jupiter looked at his uncle suspiciously.

"Maybe," Titus growled and got into the driver's seat. "Come on now."

"My mother's maiden name was Abernathy," Jupiter remarked. "Does that man have something to do with her?"

"Don't ask questions. Let's go."

Jupiter raised his eyebrows. "If this matter is about my mother, I insist on knowing what this Perceval Abernathy is all about!"

"Hey, Pete," Uncle Titus emphatically called out to the Second Investigator. "We're gonna find a place to rest and then we'll eat! Just follow me."

In fact, not another word passed his lips until he had steered the pick-up into a car park at the edge of the wooded hills of Carmine Falls. Pete and Bob in the MG came up and parked beside the pick-up.

Next to the entrance to a hiking trail were two wooden tables with benches, a bin and a notice board with a map of the area. The place was deserted in the oppressive summer heat.

"We'll sit in the shade," Uncle Titus decided.

Jupiter knew he had to be patient now. At the same time, the curiosity was almost unbearable and that made him feel uncomfortable.

Many years ago, when Jupiter was still a child, his parents died in an accident. Since then, he had gone to live with his uncle and aunt in Rocky Beach. Titus Jones always liked to talk about his brother Julius, Jupiter's father. The First Investigator's mother, however, was rarely mentioned. Allegedly, Titus and Mathilda had hardly known her. There was virtually no contact with her relatives either.

Jupiter knew of a branch of the family in Chicago that included a cousin. The First Investigator had tried to find information on the Internet but without success. The Abernathys were little more than a big question mark to him. That had bothered him for a long time, and now Jupiter had met a person named Abernathy. His uncle couldn't just pass that over. Jupiter had a right to know more!

Titus Jones seemed to realize that too. After finishing his sandwich, he cleared his throat, turned to his nephew, and said: "Jupe, if you must know... Perceval Abernathy... is your

mother's brother."

Bob and Pete listened up. "Not the brother who owes you a lot of money, is it?" asked Bob.

Uncle Titus sighed heavily. "Uh... yes. That's the one."

Jupiter stared at his friends and uncle in amazement. "What are you talking about?"

2. An Eerie Discovery

Bob and Pete exchanged an embarrassed look. Then Bob cleared his throat. “You didn’t know?” His voice sounded hoarse.

Uncle Titus adjusted his cap. For a moment, it looked as if he wanted to say something, but then he preferred to remain silent.

“No, this is the first time I’ve heard of it!” said Jupiter indignantly. His stomach rebelled. After counting slowly to ten, taking two deep breaths in and out, he took aim at his friends. “How do you know more than me?”

“Well,” Pete began, but then didn’t quite know how to continue.

“We spoke to your Aunt Mathilda,” Bob took over. “Back in *The Mystery of the Empty Grave*, soon after you disappeared, we did some research. That’s when we came across this old story.”

Pete nodded eagerly. “We thought you knew about that.”

“Hmm...” Jupe murmured as he forced himself to look indifferent. He didn’t want his friends to notice his mixed feelings. As calmly as possible, he turned to Uncle Titus and asked: “So you lent money to this Perceval Abernathy?”

“I lent it to your mother,” Titus corrected. His enormous black moustache trembled as he spoke. “Catherine asked me for money. She must have given it to Perceval, who then disappeared. He wasn’t even at your parents’ funeral service.”

“Hmm...” Jupiter mumbled, deep in thought.

Uncle Titus sighed. “To be honest, Mathilda and I were quite happy about it. The Abernathys were... how shall I put it... they are... not easy to deal with.”

“So I suppose my uncle Perceval owes you a significant sum of money,” Jupiter pondered aloud. “That at least explains why he left the store so quickly. He recognized you and feared that you would confront him.”

“Probably,” Uncle Titus grumbled as he opened the cover of his flask. Before pouring himself some steaming coffee, he looked at his watch. “We should be leaving soon... but first I want to drink my coffee in peace.”

“Why don’t you ask this Perceval about the money?” Jupiter suggested impatiently.

Uncle Titus shook his head. “It took enough strength for me to come to terms with it.”

“I have a right to meet my uncle!” Jupiter demanded.

Pete stood up and grabbed the used sandwich wrappers. “Can I stretch my legs a bit?” He pointed to the board that depicted the hiking trail and various points of interest—a waterfall and a cave system. There was a whole list of warnings about the latter.

“Whatever,” Mr Jones agreed. “Ten minutes... and stay close by. I’m afraid there’s a storm brewing.”

“I’ll be right back, sir.” Pete started to move. He was glad to escape the tense atmosphere.

Normally Mr Jones was a paragon of good humour. The multi-day tours with him were fun and there was often something to look forward to. Besides, he paid the boys well to help him load his pick-up with old furniture and other junk or scrap.

However today, everything was going wrong. Ever since Uncle Titus got lost in a road diversion, he was agitated. Then Jupiter got into a bad mood. To add to that, there was now a thunderstorm in the air, and the Second Investigator was definitely not too excited about it. He felt a tingling in his legs—like millions of nervous ants racing through his veins.

Running did him good! His steps automatically quickened. Finally, he fell into an easy trot and followed the narrow path to the waterfalls. The rocky ground was quite steep uphill, but the Second Investigator didn't mind.

After a few minutes, he reached Carmine Falls—or rather what was left of it. On a craggy rock, thin rivulets ran into a marshy pool. In mid-summer, this was really no attraction. The dark clouds above the rocks were much more impressive.

The Second Investigator climbed up the slope until he reached the upper edge of the waterfall. There was a small plateau surrounded on two sides by rocks and crooked pines. A gust of wind ran through Pete's hair. Almost simultaneously, a dull rumble sounded, followed shortly by lightning. The thunderstorm was closer than he had thought! He had underestimated the danger and now realized that he was not safe up here on the open plain.

Helplessly, he looked around. Close to him was an alcove in the rock face. It was perhaps one metre high, two to three metres wide and it looked as if it was the half-open mouth of a giant.

Pete hesitated. Should he quickly run back to the rest area or seek shelter here? It rumbled again. With a few steps, the Second Investigator was at the alcove. He took off his backpack, got out his mobile phone to call Bob. However there was no reception. Disgruntled, Pete stuffed his phone back into his backpack. This morning was a disaster.

Only now did the Second Investigator notice the cold breeze that brushed the back of his neck. He turned around and saw that on one side of the alcove, there was an opening that was not visible from the outside. On closer inspection, the opening was the entrance to a cave—probably the Carmine Caves. He was right—there was a passageway leading deeper into the rock.

Again there was thunder. Lightning flashed across the sky. Pete retreated a little into the passageway. He wondered which was worse—being outside in a thunderstorm or taking shelter in a creepy cave. At least he had a flashlight with him. It was standard equipment for The Three Investigators.

Pete took the flashlight out of his backpack and switched it on. Then he shone it into the passageway. The Second Investigator was cautious by nature, but sometimes curiosity won out even with him. He ignored the warning voice in his head and took a few steps forward. He would only want to look around for a moment. There was no way he would go deeper into the Carmine Caves.

The ground was uneven and in some places wet and slippery. This was due to small cracks and holes in the rock through which water seeped. Pete almost slipped, caught himself just in time and hit his head against a ledge. It wasn't bad, but he was briefly so distracted that he took another step without looking at the ground. Pete only noticed that it was a steep drop directly in front of him when he started to slide again.

Before he knew it, several things happened at once. Pete lost his balance. He cried out. His arms searched for a handhold in the darkness, but found none. He hurtled unchecked into the depths. The flashlight threw wild patterns of light onto the walls as Pete fell full force onto his outstretched hands. The flashlight was flung a distance away, illuminating a niche in the rock.

For a split-second, the Second Investigator realized that there was a figure lying on the ground. He caught a glimpse of a rigid white face framed by tangled black hair. Then the

light went out.

3. Pete in Pain

The darkness was stifling. Pete's heart raced, and his stomach protested.

With aching hands and a throbbing left wrist, the Second Investigator writhed on the ground. He retched, but his stomach calmed down—quite the opposite of his breathing. The blood rushed in Pete's ears and masked all other sounds. He could hardly concentrate on his surroundings.

Was there something scraping and rustling? Or was he just imagining it? Now it sounded as if small pebbles were rolling away. He had to get to the exit as quickly as possible!

However, Pete needed light for that, but his flashlight lay somewhere in this terrible darkness. What could he do? An inner voice suggested he just crouch down on the ground and wait for help, preferably with his ears covered and his eyes tightly shut... but it was no use. If he ever wanted to get back to daylight, he had to do something.

Slowly he crawled in the direction where he thought his flashlight was. Hopefully it was still working. Pete felt like he could hardly breathe. His throat tightened just at the thought of the figure. What had he seen there? Again and again the strange face appeared in his mind's eye—motionless, as if frozen.

With the fingers of his unscathed hand, he felt across the ground. After what seemed like eternity, he felt the cool metal of his flashlight. Pete pressed the switch but nothing happened. He shook the flashlight carefully. Maybe the batteries had been dislodged.

Pete could hardly fiddle with his flashlight because his hands were shaking so much. Besides, the pain in his left wrist was getting worse by the second. He was about to give up when a dull glow flickered on. The flashlight was working again, at least to the extent that Pete could figure out his immediate surroundings.

The Second Investigator counted silently to three, then aimed the weak beam around. He braced himself for anything, but there was nothing. He saw only rough stone walls, black shadows and dark patches on the ground. Pete blinked. Was that blood? The Second Investigator was probably letting his imagination run away with him. First, a lifeless figure that vanished into thin air, and now blood stains! No, he had to think like Jupiter Jones and approach it calmly and systematically. Presumably they were just some puddles that had turned dark red from minerals, mud or algae.

This thought helped Pete. He straightened up and took a deep breath. Jupiter would now thoroughly examine the cave chamber and give a lecture about rocks, metals and water. Terms like erosion, sedimentation and corrosion would come up... However, the Second Investigator only wanted one thing—to get out into the fresh air!

The way back took much longer than the way in. The exit was only a few metres above him, but he had to climb up a sloping rock face, which was tedious and very painful with his scraped hands.

Finally he reached the narrow passageway and faced the sunlight. He accelerated and only stopped when he was outside the cave. The thunderstorm had moved on surprisingly quickly. Not a single drop of rain was falling but the tension was still in the air.

For a moment, Pete closed his eyes and collected himself. "There was nothing," he said aloud, but his voice sounded hoarse and foreign.

With shaky steps, he made his way to the rest area. He held his left arm tightly against his torso—he knew his wrist urgently needed treatment.

Jupiter found it difficult to remain persistent and still appear calm and composed. “I think...” he said, “it makes sense for me to pay Perceval Abernathy a visit.” He and Bob sat in the pick-up truck together with Uncle Titus as the thunderstorm rumbled overhead.

“Out of the question!” Uncle Titus’s moustache quivered at these words. “We don’t want any contact with the Abernathys!”

“You don’t want any contact,” Jupiter clarified, “but I could visit him... and perhaps collect the money.”

Uncle Titus, however, did not want to say anything about it. “I already allow you to work as investigators with your friends—even when you were much younger... but as debt collectors? That’s going too far.”

“Don’t you want to know what Perceval needed the money for?” Bob now interfered in the conversation.

“No,” Uncle Titus replied curtly. “When Pete turns up, we’ll leave. What’s taking him so long anyway?”

“He must have been looking for shelter,” Bob said.

Jupiter was annoyed beyond measure. He had so many questions but Uncle Titus avoided giving straight answers. If he wanted to know more, he had to talk to this Perceval.

Jupiter began to go through the alternatives. He could secretly go to Carmine Falls in the coming days. It shouldn’t be too difficult to get his uncle’s address.

That was as far as Jupiter got with his thoughts, however. Someone was walking straight towards them. The light-coloured T-shirt was soiled with dust and dirt, the hands were scraped up and the face was so pale as if all the blood had escaped from it.

“Pete!” Uncle Titus gasped.

“Goodness!” Bob jumped out of the pick-up. “What happened?”

“I fell,” the Second Investigator said, “and I think I broke my wrist.”

“Let me see.” Jupe had now also got out of the pick-up.

Reluctantly, Pete held out his injured hand to him. The joint was already swollen.

Jupiter grasped it gently. “I can’t rule out a fracture. We’d better get you to a clinic.”

“How did you fall in the first place?” asked Bob.

“I only looked briefly into the Carmine Caves, that is, into a cave passage,” Pete admitted meekly. “—And then I slipped... and... there was... well, there was... rubble—loose rubble.”

Jupiter looked his friend in the eye. Pete was hiding something. It was clear, but he decided to ask the Second Investigator about it later when it was more convenient.

Titus grabbed his flask that was still on the table. “Let’s get going now. We’ll go to a clinic in Salinas, Pete.”

However it did not come to that. Bob was once again amazed at how Jupiter managed to turn a situation around so that it benefited him. The First Investigator was determined to stay in Carmine Falls and Pete’s injury suited him just fine. Jupiter managed to convince his uncle in no time that Pete needed treatment immediately. He then told him that he had seen a sign for a clinic across the road from the supermarket.

Finally they came to an agreement—Bob would drive the MG with Pete and Jupe to the clinic in Carmine Falls, and Uncle Titus would set off for Salinas alone. Later in the evening, they would meet back at Carmine Falls.

However, Jupiter's plan only partially worked as the clinic was closed. While Pete and Bob waited on a bench in the sun, the First Investigator went into the supermarket again—this time to ask about another clinic. When he came out, he looked thoughtful.

"So?" asked Pete.

"Just follow me," Jupe said. He then crossed the road. Bob and Pete followed him.

As they walked past faded advertising posters and empty shops, Jupiter turned to Pete and asked: "I'd like to know what you saw in the cave."

"What makes you think I saw anything?" Pete asked in amazement.

"You hesitated when telling us what happened in the cave," Jupe replied. "At the rest area, it was obvious that you wanted to withhold parts of the story from us—not just because of your choice of words, but because of your body language. Your pupils dilated and your expression was no longer distorted with pain, but of fear. Something in the cave was troubling you."

"If you already know, I don't have to tell you," Pete said.

"Well, I don't know, so I'd like you to tell me," Bob interjected.

"To be honest, I have no idea what exactly I saw in the cave," Pete said hesitantly. "I fell, got a terrible fright and was in pain afterwards. I couldn't think straight."

"So it was something you can't explain rationally," Jupiter concluded. "Something seemingly unusual?"

"There was someone—probably a human being," Pete admitted, "or at least something like a human. It looked creepy, kind of dead... but then the thing was gone almost immediately."

"With the combination of stress, poor lighting conditions and an active imagination, you could very well be experiencing hallucinations," Jupiter said a touch too lightly. "It adds missing information to a false overall picture."

"Maybe," Pete said resignedly. "I want to get some treatment now."

"No problem..." Jupiter replied as he led his friends past a busy petrol station and a busy diner. Carmine Falls was sleepy, but there were clearly some people in town.

Moments later, Jupiter stopped in front of a small building. "We're here." Jupiter opened a glass door and pushed Pete through. "This is Dr Craddock's office."

"Jupe, are you sure we are in the right place?" Pete asked as they entered the anteroom.

"We're not," Jupiter replied. "I checked with the supermarket. The doctor in the closed clinic is sick in bed himself and there is no substitute—except Dr Craddock here. He can provide first aid in emergencies."

Pete screwed up his face when Jupiter pushed him to the registration counter. Less than two minutes later, Pete was sitting in the waiting room with his two friends. Opposite them was an old man with a hunting dog and a woman with a basket in which something was rustling—probably a hamster or guinea pig. On the walls were posters of puppies and kittens playing.

"Well, where's your pet?" the man asked, scrutinizing. His skin was so dark that his eyes shone almost unnaturally. His gaze betrayed suspicion and at the same time, a hint of curiosity.

"My friend hurt himself," Jupiter explained. "He needs some urgent treatment."

"Are you just passing by here?"

"Yes," Bob replied.

"What happened to your friend?" the old man continued probing.

"He hurt his hand hiking," Bob explained.

"If you leave the right path, you have to expect danger," the man said gloomily.

“Even on the right path, you can stumble,” the woman said. She sounded a little annoyed.

“Uh... I just fell in a cave,” Pete explained.

“My goodness!” the woman exclaimed. “Not the Carmine Caves! What are all those warning signs for? The cave system is extensive and dangerous!”

“Oh really?” Pete swallowed.

The lady nodded. “Seven different entrances are known. They are supposed to be barred! What happened?”

The dog whined.

“It’s okay, Bella,” the old man calmed his dog. Then he looked at the boys piercingly. “A few years ago, students from this town got lost in the cave. It’s a miracle that they all returned to daylight in one piece.”

Again the dog whined.

“Hey Bootsie, has Bella been eating rubbish again?” the woman changed the subject.

“Bella doesn’t eat rubbish!” the man replied. “It’s the wickedness of people that gets to her.”

“That’s what you think.” The woman laughed to herself. “I heard what happened this morning.”

“Oh, yeah?” Bootsie replied, not amused. “—And what did you hear?”

“Your dog got into Leland Hanson’s Jeep and ate the remains of a burger.”

“Burger?” Bootsie was annoyed. “That wasn’t a burger.”

“What else could it have been?”

“Bella followed a trail of blood!”

4. Sunset Drive

Bob listened up. "A trail of blood?"

"If I do say so!" Bootsie affirmed. "I called the sheriff right away!"

Normally, this would have been an opportunity for Jupiter, but today he only made a thoughtful face.

Bob, on the other hand, found the conversation very interesting. "I'd like to know more about that."

"Is that so?" Bootsie asked suspiciously. "Strange... or maybe it isn't. Evil seems to magically attract people, like an abyss to look down into. Yet no one ever asks about the good things."

"Yes, I do," Pete said quietly. "I do."

Bootsie put his hand on the whimpering dog's head. "If you stare into the darkness for too long, you become part of it."

"Well, that's your point of view," Jupiter finally said something.

The man looked at him sternly. "The back seat of the Jeep was full of blood! Bella, as an experienced hunting dog, discovered that right away, and jumped into the car."

"It was the remains of a burger," the woman insisted. "Sheriff Pruitt saw for himself, didn't he?"

"My neighbour is up to something!" Bootsie announced. "I may be old, but I can see the depths of people. My Bella has tracked down a crime."

"Then she should become a police dog," the woman said with amusement.

"You can laugh all you want!" Now Bootsie was getting loud. His dog ducked her head. "Leland Hanson is trying to cover up something sinister!"

There was another rustle in the woman's basket. She glanced inside once and then looked at the old man again. "Bootsie, you'd better stop spying on your neighbours. If you stand at the window all day with binoculars, you end up seeing things that aren't there."

"Mr Washington with Bella please!" A grey-haired man peered through an open door into the waiting room.

"It's our turn, Bella." Bootsie stood up and led Bella by the leash towards the door. The dog resisted as best she could.

When the man and dog had gone into the treatment room, the woman with the basket told the boys: "Don't listen to him. Bootsie T. Washington lives in his own world!" Then she smiled warmly. "Well, I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Majorie Dever."

"Bob Andrews," Bob said with a smile. Then he pointed to his friends. "Jupiter Jones and Pete Crenshaw."

"How come you chose Carmine Falls as your destination?" asked Mrs Dever curiously.

"We—" Bob began.

However, he was interrupted by Jupiter: "I have family here in Carmine Falls."

"Oh really?" Majorie Dever looked up delighted. "I've lived in this place for over forty years. I probably know almost everyone here."

Jupiter hesitated briefly before speaking. "Does the name Perceval Abernathy mean anything to you?" He found it difficult to ask about his uncle. Bob suspected that his friend

feared an unpleasant answer.

"Of course!" The lady nodded eagerly. "He is Bootsie's neighbour! In fact, so is Leland Hanson. Leland rents a room from Perceval and his wife."

"Uh..." Bob mumbled in confusion. "Leland Hanson? Isn't that whom the old man was just talking about?"

"Now you've lost me," Pete grumbled.

"It's quite simple," Mrs Dever said good-naturedly. "Bootsie and his dog Bella live in Sunset Drive, right next door to the Abernathys, and they in turn have recently started renting a room to Leland Hanson."

"Aha!" said Pete. "So Leland Hanson is the guy with the blood in the Jeep."

"Burger sauce," Mrs Dever corrected. "Leland Hanson only had burger sauce in his car."

Jupiter cleared his throat. "So Mr Hanson is staying with the Abernathys now?"

"It's hard to believe, but yes," said Mrs Dever. She was decidedly forthcoming. "Leland Hanson and Perceval Abernathy were best friends from childhood. Not only that, Leland was very close to Perceval's family. Unfortunately Perceval's two sisters died young, and the Abernathys had to cope with a few more cruel strokes of destiny—family feuds, unemployment, illnesses... Perceval was devastated! Instead of staying and supporting him, Leland just disappeared. That was many years ago—I can't even remember how long exactly."

"Then what?" asked Bob.

"He came back two months ago," Mrs Dever replied. "First he moved to Carmine Inn. That's a guest house here in town. Perceval didn't want anything to do with him, but one or two weeks ago, Leland suddenly packed all his things and went to stay with the Abernathys after all."

"And..." Jupiter asked slowly, "what do you think about the Abernathys?"

"They are not exactly model residents, but they are certainly too lazy for criminal acts." The woman laughed again, but her laughter died abruptly when she looked at Jupiter. "Uh... you said you have family here, and if you are related to them, I didn't mean to—"

"It's all right," Jupiter said coolly.

Embarrassed, the woman began to stroke her pet in the basket. "Perceval is a good man. He just can't get anything done properly."

"He's my uncle," Jupiter finally revealed.

Bob smiled encouragingly at Mrs Dever. "Could you perhaps give us his address?"

An hour later, Pete's hand was wrapped in a bandage with a paw pattern. The vet had examined him and found that the joint was not broken. Nevertheless, Pete should rest his arm for a few days. At the end, the Second Investigator was given a sweet as a reward—at least not a dog biscuit.

Now The Three Investigators were standing in front of a run-down house on the outskirts of Carmine Falls. The white paint was peeling and the cars parked in the driveway were old and dented.

Jupiter got a slight goose bump. So this was 54 Sunset Drive—the address the talkative Mrs Dever had given them.

"Gosh!" Bob remarked. "Is this is where your uncle lives?"

Jupiter bit his lower lip. The Jones family had never been rich, but against this hovel, the house of Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus seemed like a luxury villa to him. The house in front of him looked as if it would not only accommodate people, but also a considerable amount of

bad news. However, there was no turning back now. Jupiter was determined to find out more about his mother's family.

After he rang the bell, nothing happened for quite a while. Instead, the First Investigator spotted a dark face at the window in the neighbouring house. Old Bootsie T. Washington was probably on observation duty again. Jupiter waved at him. The curtains were quickly drawn.

Jupiter rang the bell again. Now he heard footsteps coming to the door. The door opened and a slim, tall man with glasses and blond hair appeared. He looked very youthful at first glance, but after a more thorough observation, Jupiter estimated him to be in his mid-forties.

"We don't donate anything."

"My name is Jupiter Jones, and I would like to visit my uncle."

The blond man adjusted his glasses. "Huh? What's your name again?"

"Jupiter Jones. I am the nephew of Perceval Abernathy," said the First Investigator impatiently.

"Really? Now?" the man asked in amazement.

"Yes, I want to talk to him."

"I'm afraid it's not a good time." The blond man adjusted his glasses again. "Uh... we have work to do."

"What?"

"Um... just busy," the man replied. "Stuff like that."

"Stuff like what?" the First Investigator probed.

"Work!" the blond man barked. He nodded affirmatively and his glasses slipped. "We have a project to work on."

"It won't take long," Jupiter promised. "We have to go back to Rocky Beach tonight."

"Lee, who's at the door?" asked another man who now stepped behind the blond.

Leland Hanson turned around nervously. "It's your nephew and two other boys."

"Darn," Perceval Abernathy mumbled.

"That's not a very friendly greeting," Jupiter remarked.

Perceval looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way, and... uh... also my reaction earlier in the supermarket..." He hesitated and stared at Jupiter for a little too long—holding his gaze without blinking. Then he pondered for a moment and finally said: "Oh, come in for a moment."

"Percy!" Leland said alarmingly.

Perceval exhaled audibly. "Lee, it's my nephew—Cathy's son."

Leland mumbled something. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went back into the house.

"Come on in," said Perceval. "I'll make us some coffee."

"I'd rather just have a glass of water," Jupiter said as he followed his uncle down the hallway to a living room with an adjoining kitchenette. The television was on.

Stretched out on the couch was a woman who was probably in her late twenties. Somehow she managed to look beautiful and neglected at the same time. Her blonde hair was growing out dark, her sleeveless shirt was washed out, and her long legs were tucked into grey sweatpants that were cut off just above her knees.

As the boys entered, she looked up briefly. "Hi."

"This is... well, this is my wife, Jolene... uh... so she's your aunt," Perceval said. "Jo, this is your nephew, Jupiter Jones."

"Cathy's Baby Fatso?" Jolene looked up briefly. "The one on TV? ... Well, hello, nephew." With that, she turned back to the television again.

When Jupiter was very young, he had been a child actor in a television series called *The Wee Rogues*. It was a comedy about a group of children. At that time, Jupe was extremely plump and comical in appearance, He made millions laugh with his quirky dialogues and at the way he kept falling over things. His character was called ‘Baby Fatso’. It was a name Jupiter didn’t like to be reminded of.

“Jolene is not a family person,” Perceval said apologetically.

Jupiter realized to his dismay that his other aunt, Mathilda, was actually quite enough for him... and now, before his very eyes was Aunt Jolene! More and more, he began to doubt whether he was doing the right thing... but it was out of the question for him to turn back now.

5. The Pendant

“Titus wants his money back, I suppose,” Perceval said as he filled water into a kettle.

“That may be, but I want answers first and foremost,” Jupiter replied.

Perceval looked at him. “I should have recognized you at the supermarket. You clearly take after your grandmother... just like my two sisters.”

“Is... my grandmother still alive?” Jupiter ran his hand through his black hair.

“She died last year,” Perceval said as he lit the gas stove and put the kettle on it.

“Make a coffee for me,” Jolene said wanly.

Perceval straightened up. “Your grandmother Angela was not easy. She left almost everything to her partner. The rest of her things are now in the garage. Since your Uncle Titus runs a scrap yard, he might be interested in it.”

“He runs a salvage yard,” Jupiter corrected.

“Whatever... I can give him some items from my mother’s estate. If you want, you can look at the things with your friends right now.”

“Yes, take the stuff please!” Jolene suddenly said cheerfully.

“You want us to clear out your garage?” asked Bob incredulously.

“Not everything!” Perceval raised his hands placatingly. “You should just choose something. There are some good stuff in there—vases, cupboards, a sewing machine, and even an old gramophone. Titus could sell that.”

“You can take Cathy’s old stuff too,” Jolene said from the couch. “We don’t need her exercise books or her first dancing shoes.”

“Cathy’s things remain,” Perceval immediately objected. Leland nodded in agreement.

“I knew it,” Jolene grumbled and turned back to the television, which was showing a lurid report about a landslide on the coastal road.

“Consider the stuff from the garage as a down payment,” Perceval said. “With a bit of luck, I’ll be able to pay Titus back the rest soon.”

“We’ll look at the things,” Jupiter decided. It was a good opportunity to spend the next few hours with the Abernathys. “However, I would like to know what Uncle Titus’s money was used for and why he doesn’t want to talk about it.”

“I needed a car then... for my job,” Perceval said quickly, “and I couldn’t afford one without financial help.”

While waiting for the water to boil, Perceval poured water into glasses and handed them to the boys. “Here... If you want, we can go straight to the garage.”

“You haven’t told us anything about yourself yet,” Bob interjected unexpectedly. He looked Perceval straight in the eye. “—And you haven’t asked Jupe how he lives now.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Perceval scratched his chin. “Sorry. There are other things on my mind right now.” Nervously, he scooped instant coffee into three mugs. “Lee and I are freelancers, so we’re working on various projects of our own.”

“It’s also called ‘being unemployed’,” Jolene commented sarcastically.

“Speak for yourself,” Leland said gruffly.

“Lee, why do you talk to my wife like that?” said Perceval. It sounded dull.

Leland glowered at him. “Isn’t that the truth?”

"It's all a bit too much right now." Perceval now turned back to Jupiter. "How about we organize a family reunion in the autumn? Then we'll exchange photos and talk about all our relatives."

Jolene looked at him in horror. "Do without me!"

"Anyway, it's bad today." Perceval poured hot water into the three mugs. "Let's go to the garage."

"Percy, did you get me the chips?" Jolene asked out of the blue. She didn't take her eyes off the television, on which a budding model with teary eyes was now getting a new haircut.

"I didn't get to buy your stuff," Perceval admitted meekly.

"By the way, you are banned from the supermarket, Mr Abernathy," Bob blurted out and immediately regretted it.

Perceval looked concerned. Jolene groaned and Leland cleared his throat.

"Well, I guess we'll go outside," Perceval decided and took his coffee mug along.

The garage was a complete mess, but Jupiter knew enough about junk and second-hand goods to spot a few worthwhile items right away. Everything together could sell for a good two hundred dollars at the salvage yard. That wasn't much, but at least it was a start.

"I think we'll find something here for my uncle," Jupiter announced. "We'll be busy for quite a while, though."

"Go ahead." Perceval sheepishly pushed aside a broken bicycle. He and Leland then went back into the house.

"Do we really want to sort the junk here?" asked Bob.

"No." Jupiter dropped an old garden hose. "Of course not. I'll mark the high-value stuff later, then Uncle Titus can load it—assuming he even wants to. Anyway, there should still be enough room in his pick-up."

"What do we do until then?" Pete asked.

The First Investigator shrugged his shoulders.

"We could start by taking a look inside Leland Hanson's Jeep," Bob suggested. "I'd like to know what the dog found on the back seat."

"—And what if they catch us?" asked Pete.

Bob looked around. "The living room and kitchen is on the other side of the house. Even through the narrow hallway window, you'd have to bend a lot to see the cars parked on this part of the driveway."

"If you say so." Pete followed Bob to the two vehicles, with Jupe walking indecisively behind.

"Can Mr Washington actually see us?" Pete looked at the neighbour's house.

"Maybe," Bob replied. "In fact, that doesn't matter. I don't think he'll mind if we investigate this case."

To their right was a dusty Chevrolet, to the left, the Jeep—a rusty 4-door Cherokee with run-down tyres. Bob found a rear window wound down. The door was also unlocked, and he quietly opened it. Just then, a fly buzzed towards him. It had been hovering around a dirty old woollen blanket spread over the back seat.

Bob groaned as he got in the car and lifted the woollen blanket. There was an intense smell of ketchup and pickles.

"So, do you see anything?" Pete asked.

"Bread crumbs," Bob noted, "and a pickle... plus residue of mustard and ketchup on the backrest."

"So these stains could really come from a burger," Pete said with relief.

"The ingredients are about right," Jupiter admitted and took a closer look at the stains. His investigative instinct had finally reawakened. "However, I'm puzzled. It doesn't look like someone dropped a burger and then squashed or sat on it."

"So what are you saying?" Pete asked.

Jupiter leaned further forward. "Judging from the stains, someone smeared the ingredients of a burger with a lot of pressure in a large area over the backrest and the seat."

"You mean the mess was made on purpose?" Bob enquired.

"That's right. What looks at first glance like an accident during a meal is obviously an attempt to cover up another stain," Jupiter surmised. "The sheriff should have noticed that too, but I guess he only looked in here for a moment."

"Perhaps he didn't take the neighbour seriously," Pete suggested.

"It's possible," Bob added.

Jupiter continued his investigation. "What is striking is the amount of ketchup that has spread here. It probably far exceeds that normally put on a burger. In addition, there are traces of it on the headrest."

"Is it ketchup at all?" asked Pete hesitantly. "—Or is it blood? I saw such stains on the ground in the cave!"

"In the cave?" Bob looked at his friend thoughtfully.

"—Or maybe it was just one of those..." Pete searched for the right word. "—Sediment! Exactly. A sediment of red rock and sand in a puddle... or rust... or maybe remains of... er... ketchup."

"Commendable that you are trying to find an explanation," Jupe said. "Let's put a question mark over the stains in the cave for now. Here, however, the matter looks different. In my opinion, someone rubbed ketchup over blood stains."

"So it's a possible crime after all..." Bob thought aloud.

"Leland Hanson had to assume that Bootsie T. Washington would call the sheriff after his dog sniffed this out," the First Investigator surmised. "So he acted quickly. He spread a burger on the seat and smeared additional ketchup on the stains."

"Wonder where the blood came from," Bob said uneasily. "Neither Leland nor your uncle or aunt seem to be hurt."

"Maybe Leland murdered someone!" hissed Pete.

"Hmm..." Jupiter murmured. "Blood is not automatically an indication of a crime. However, in this case the sheriff were deliberately deceived. We can assume that Leland and perhaps also Perceval have had a run-in with the law."

"Poaching?" suggested Bob.

"No, Leland didn't have to put a shot deer in the back seat. After all, this Jeep has a rear cargo area," Jupiter deduced. "There was someone sitting in the back seat who had a wound on his head or upper body. The person also had dirty shoes. I see yellowish and brownish lumps of clay. They are still a bit damp despite the heat, and—" He paused.

A shiny silver object was stuck between the smeared upholstery. Carefully Jupiter pulled at it. It was a filigree chain that had snapped. A star-shaped pendant slipped off the chain and fell onto the foot well. Jupiter felt sick, and it wasn't just because of the heat and the intense smell of burger ingredients.

"Jupe?" enquired Bob. "All right?"

Jupe did not answer. Instead, he stared at the pendant in horror.

"What's that?" Bob couldn't see the object in Jupiter's hand. "What have you found there?"

“Nothing that helps us,” Jupiter said quickly... but clearly, that was a lie. He knew this pendant very well, in fact.

After all these years, many memories of his parents had faded. Although Jupiter had a photographic memory, he could hardly remember their faces. He chalked it up to ‘repression’, but he had never forgotten the pendant. His mother had always worn it. It had been her lucky pendant and she had strictly forbidden young Jupiter to play with it. He could have drawn the pendant from memory—with all the details. Only the gemstone on the star puzzled him. He recalled that it had been a small emerald—bottle-green and sparkling. Now, it was a sapphire. It was dark blue and did not sparkle—at least not in this light.

Jupiter forced himself to remain rational. Logic was needed here, not a vague gut feeling. Dead bodies neither disappeared into thin air nor did they return. However, pieces of jewellery could change owners. Had his mother given the necklace to her brother shortly before her accident? And had he then given it to his wife Jolene? Had Jolene in turn lost the necklace in the back seat of Leland’s car? That was quite possible... but he had hoped that the pendant had nothing to do with the blood.

Jupiter decided not to dwell on the pendant. It was a private matter—in every respect. He secretly put the found object in his pocket. Then he got out of the Jeep, stretched his arms and legs and turned to his two friends.

“Fellas, I’d say we have a case.”

6. Carmine Inn

Later in the day, Uncle Titus returned from Salinas. Pete and Bob could not explain exactly how Jupiter had managed to, in a few words, change his uncle's mind. Basically, the First Investigator said that he urgently needed to stay back to meet his mother's family. So the three boys got to remain in Carmine Falls for a day or two. However, Uncle Titus had refused to take any of the stuff from the Abernathys' garage, conveniently so as his pick-up was already full with items from Salinas.

Within half an hour, everything had been organized. Uncle Titus had paid a deposit for a room at Carmine Inn, the guest house diagonally opposite the Abernathys' house. It was run by a portly woman in her mid-fifties named Clementine Weed.

Soon, Uncle Titus drove off on his way back to Rocky Beach. Only when he was out of sight did Mrs Weed turn to the boys. "Hungry?" she asked. Her deep voice revealed that she smoked far too much.

Soon, Uncle Titus drove off on his way back to Rocky Beach. Only when he was out of sight did Mrs Weed turn to the boys. "Hungry?" she asked. Her deep voice revealed that she smoked far too much.

"I'm famished!" Jupiter admitted. The nausea from the afternoon had finally disappeared.

"Then come with me to the dining room." Clementine clattered ahead on her leopard mules and showed them the way. "I'll have your room ready for you in a moment. It's Room 101 and it is on the first floor. The bathroom is at the end of the corridor, the toilet is right next to it. The water is cold at night. You can buy shower gel, deodorant, toothpaste and stuff like that from me. I'll give you a special price. Apart from that, I also bake biscuits, pierce ears, and do henna tattoos. Just talk to me if you need anything," she said without taking a breath. "Oh yeah... tonight I think it's going to be a bit noisy as I'm having a party."

"It's okay with us," Pete replied politely. So far, he had felt rather uncomfortable in this guest house. Just the idea of having his ears pierced by Clementine was creepy, and he had no interest in tattoos either. However, he wouldn't mind munching biscuits.

With a queasy feeling in his stomach, the Second Investigator entered the dining room. It was a large, stuffy room. Colourful Tiffany lamps provided dim light that was reflected by numerous mirrors on the walls.

Since The Three Investigators were the only guests, they had free choice of seats. Jupiter decided on a table by the window. The curtains were half drawn, but they could still see across the street. The Abernathy's house was lit red by the last rays of the evening sun.

Mrs Weed lit a candle on the table. Then she brought three plates, a huge bowl of tacos and two kinds of dips, three glasses with lots of ice cubes, and a jug of lemonade that shimmered pink in the twilight.

Lost in thought, Jupiter stared out into the street. Suddenly something happened at the house opposite. The door opened and Perceval appeared. He looked around, fell into a light trot and hurried across the street, heading straight for the guest house!

The Abernathys did not know that the three boys would be staying in Carmine Falls. Jupiter had planned to take them by surprise the next morning and had worked out a

conversation tactic to uncover more information. Now the First Investigator had to think of a new strategy, but the doorbell rang before he could do so.

"Customers," Clementine called out delightedly. Then she hurried out of the room.

Jupiter stood up and crept to the door. He listened tensely. The high heels of the mules clattered towards the entrance—clack, clack, clack. The door opened, followed by Clementine's smoky voice: "Percy!"

"Hello, Clementine, do you have a moment?"

"For you, always. What is it?"

"I need pain relief tablets."

"Hey, you can get that at the supermarket!"

"I can't go there now," Perceval replied quietly.

"Really?" She laughed out. "So you need something urgently? Does Jolene have migraines again?"

"Er... yes."

"She shouldn't sit in front of the TV so much," the landlady advised. "By the way, I already gave her some stuff for headaches yesterday... and for insomnia and all that jazz."

"So do you have tablets for relieving pain?"

"Yes, a few fell off the truck last time, but they don't work so well and might not be any good."

"I'll give you five dollars!" Perceval sounded impatient.

"It's a good deal for me." Now Clementine sounded pleased. "I'll get you the stuff from the cupboard."

"You are a gem."

"I know."

Footsteps sounded again. Jupe pressed himself against the wall next to the door. The landlady clattered across the hall to another room. There was silence for a moment, then footsteps again.

"Here," she said, "and don't overdo it, okay?"

Perceval laughed out. It didn't sound real. "Sure. Thank you and have a good evening!"

"Carmine Inn seems to be a secret pharmacy," Jupiter noted quietly. "Our landlady is a sly one."

"A case for The Three Investigators?" Pete asked.

Jupiter pinched his lower lip thoughtfully, then shook his head. "Leland Hanson and the Abernathys have priority. I suggest we rest tonight and come up with a plan in the morning."

When they had finished eating, Jupiter wanted to go straight to the room but Pete hesitated. "Wait a moment."

"What is it?" asked Bob.

"My hand still hurts! I'd like to take something for the pain so I can sleep."

"We'll get some medication at the supermarket tomorrow," Jupiter promised.

Pete shook his head vehemently. "—But my hand hurts now!"

Bob was about to say something when the doorbell rang again. Clementine came rushing out of the kitchen. She was wearing pink rubber gloves with a little dish-washing foam still stuck to them. She opened the door with a flourish.

"Please excuse the late intrusion!" said a man in a green tweed suit. With his fine horn-rimmed glasses, white hair and brown leather briefcase, he looked as if he were about to give a lecture at the university. "Do you have a room available?"

“Of course!” Clementine said joyfully. “Please come with me to the counter.”

There, the landlady handed the elderly gentleman a key, told him the price per night and repeated the information she had already told the boys—including the ear-piercing and tattooing services. Then she made a quick note of the guest’s name. “Have a nice stay at Carmine Inn, Mr Greene!”

“Thank you,” the man said with a polite nod of his head. “Then I’ll retire right away.”

As soon as he had disappeared, Pete went up to Clementine. “I have a sprained hand. Do you have pain relief tablets for me?”

“Poor thing!” Clementine glanced at Pete’s injured hand. “I think I have another pack somewhere. I’d be happy to sell it to you. Is five dollars okay?”

“Yes,” Pete said quickly and pulled out his wallet. Bob gave him a reproachful look.

“I have to look for those things,” Clementine said. “Why don’t you go up to your room first? I’ll bring the tablets right up.”

The landlady kept her promise. Five minutes later, she knocked on the door of the room. In one hand, she held a glass of water; in the other, a small plastic tablet bottle with an orange cap and the label of a pharmacy.

“Only take one at a time,” she commanded, “but not before meals.”

“You know your way around,” Jupiter remarked.

“I do what I can. Sleep well!” Clementine pulled the door closed behind her.

Room 101 had a window facing the street—just like the dining room. Jupiter peered through a gap in the curtain. Everything was already dark at Bootsie T. Washington’s house, but the light was still on at the Abernathys’.

Jupiter pulled a chair towards him. He couldn’t sleep now anyway. While Bob and Pete got ready for the night, he stared out the window.

All these years he had been secretly convinced that his mother’s family was great—all award-winning scientists with impeccable careers. In less humble moments, Jupiter thought of himself as a genius—for example, when he was correcting his maths teacher; solving a complicated criminal case; or creatively constructing gadgets, such as repairing walkie-talkies and making a metal detector out of broken and scrap metal parts. Just a week ago, he had developed a backpack equipped with an ingenious anti-theft device. In short, Jupiter was gifted, and that’s why he had also wanted to be seen as coming from an above-average talented family. His uncle Perceval, on the other hand, was a complete disappointment. Jupiter felt miserable.

His friends were already fast asleep when he finally decided to go to bed. At that very moment, he noticed movement across the street. Perceval had stepped out of the house, closely followed by Leland, who was shouldering a bulging backpack. Both men walked to Leland’s Jeep.

Jupe glanced quickly at his watch. The luminous digits already read 11:20 pm. Where were they going at this hour?

Jupiter knew what he had to do and he was glad he hadn’t changed yet. He opened the bedside drawer and grabbed Pete’s car key. Then he went out of the room and ran down the stairs as fast as he could.

In the backyard of the guest house, colourful lights shimmered and disco music boomed. Through a window, he saw dancing figures, but Clementine’s party did not interest him.

As the First Investigator stepped outside, Leland’s car was already passing him. Jupiter ducked into the shadows of the building, ran past Clementine’s old Mercedes and Mr

Greene's old-fashioned Buick to the side of the guest house where Pete's MG was parked.

Jupiter swung himself onto the driver's seat and very soon, he was on the road. Sunset Drive ended just past the guest house on a lonely country road. In the distance, the tail lights of a car shone. As there were hardly any vehicles around at this time of the night, there was a good possibility that the car in front was Leland's Jeep.

A moment later, the car turned left. Jupiter followed at a distance behind as he had to be careful not to go too near in case Leland suspected that he was being followed. It also wasn't safe for Jupe to turn the headlights off. In any case, he was quite sure that neither Perceval nor Leland had seen him and his friends in the MG before.

After ten minutes of the pursuit, the First Investigator could still make out the tail lights. However, if Perceval and Leland were to go all the way to San Benito, Jupe then had to decide whether he would follow.

Eventually the rear lights disappeared completely into the darkness. Jupiter drove around a bend, and found himself on a long straight stretch. He recognized this road. Here, somewhere, had to be the rest area where he and his friends had taken their lunch break with Uncle Titus. It was also where one could reach the Carmine Caves. Were the men heading there?

Indeed they were. Shortly afterwards, the First Investigator reached the place with the two tables. Leland's car was parked in the same car park where Uncle Titus's pick-up had been earlier in the day. However, there was no sign of either the driver or the passenger.

Jupiter had to park the MG somewhere else. He drove further on, and lucky for him, he found a side road not too far away. After he parked the MG by the side of the road, he looked around for his backpack to get his flashlight—only that his backpack was not there. It was in his room at the guest house—with the anti-theft device activated.

In any case, Jupiter got out of the car quickly. He ran back along the road to the entrance of the rest area. There, he peered across to the two wooden tables, next to which was the start of the hiking trail. Jupiter realized that it was far too dangerous to go into the cave in the dark. He was here alone and didn't know the terrain. Moreover, no one knew where he was. The First Investigator liked to take risks but in this case, his common sense prevailed even if it annoyed him that he couldn't follow the men. Disgruntled, he looked for a place to wait and finally took cover behind a thorny bush near Leland's Jeep.

His patience was severely tested. Pursuits were an essential part of investigations, but sometimes they dragged on endlessly. Jupe tried hard not to fall asleep. His eyelids grew heavy, his legs ached and an ant climbed up his arm. Hopefully there weren't any more of this! He just had to stay awake until the men come back out.

It took what felt like hours before the First Investigator heard footsteps. Perceval and Leland appeared, even though they were barely recognizable in the darkness.

Perceval cursed. It did not sound angry, however, but desperate. "We did everything wrong! Everything!"

"Calm down, Percy! This is a serious matter."

"This is really frustrating!" Perceval hit the roof of the Jeep with the flat of his hand.

Leland snorted in annoyance. "Leave my Jeep in one piece!"

"I can't believe I'm going along with this! And with you too! We should have handled it differently."

"Of course," Leland said ironically. "We might as well have invited Bootsie. He was ready and waiting! Then we've got your precious nephew breathing down our necks."

"I know." Perceval's voice sounded hollow. "—But I can't keep this up, Lee! I even had blood under my fingernails this morning."

“You get used to it,” Leland remarked as he opened the driver’s door. “—Or not.”

“I feel sick,” Perceval moaned. “—And your car stinks of burgers.”

“That is your fault. You should have got the cleaning products,” Leland replied reproachfully.

“I know!” Perceval stopped beside the open car door. “It’s all going wrong... as if the Chalice of Destiny is conspiring against us!”

“Nonsense,” Leland hissed. “Since when did you believe in such things? It’s just a stupid cup, nothing more. Now get in!”

Perceval gave way. Jupiter heard doors being slammed, then the engine started.

When the Jeep had driven out of the car park, Jupiter came groaning out of his hiding place. Despite the warmth, he had goose bumps.

There was no longer any doubt. His uncle was in deep trouble. Just how bad, Jupiter did not want to imagine. Exhausted, he made his way back to the MG.

7. Breakfast at Clementine's

The alarm clock rang early—much too early. Bob was the only one who got up well-rested. He hadn't even noticed the party in the courtyard the night before. Jupiter, on the other hand, was tired from the previous night's pursuit and Pete had kept waking up because his wrist hurt.

"—Only because you told me not to take more than half a tablet!" The Second Investigator scowled at Bob.

"Actually I was against you taking any at all," Bob quipped. "Who knows what that stuff is."

Jupiter grabbed the bottle and checked the label. "This is a paracetamol product from a well-known company. However, it expired a fortnight ago. I could imagine Clementine somehow has a stash of goods that are thrown out by pharmacies or put in the collection bins by customers." He ran his hand through his thick black hair, which was sticking out messily from his head. "Honestly, I don't care right now."

"That's unusual, coming from you," Bob said in amazement.

"I haven't told you where I was last night!" Juve then reported about the pursuit and the conversation he had overheard.

When he had finished, Pete stared at him in amazement. "I knew it! There was something in the cave, but what has your uncle got to do with it?" His eyes snapped open. "Maybe Leland and Perceval are murderers!"

"I don't know, Pete." Bob rubbed the back of his neck doubtfully. "You said yourself that there was no one in the cave when you looked again. Bodies don't disappear into thin air."

"Fellas," Jupiter said as calmly as possible. "The only way we can clear this up is by thoroughly examining the cave."

"Without me!" Pete dragged himself to the door. "I'm tired and hungry, my wrist is killing me, and I still have to deal with yesterday's scare."

"Why not we go down for breakfast first?" Jupiter suggested conciliatory. "After that, we'll discuss how to proceed."

Clementine had just set up the breakfast buffet. The selection took some getting used to. Besides cheese in vine leaves and a bowl of marshmallows and crab chips, there were corn fritters, mate tea and various salads that had apparently been left over from the party. The boys loaded up on food and sat down at their place by the window.

Pete bravely tried a salad with pineapple and followed it with some bean purée. When he had eaten enough, he stood up. "No matter what you say, I'll take another tablet—a whole one this time! I'll go get it now."

"Uh-huh..." Bob mumbled absent-mindedly as he peered out of the window.

Over at the Abernathys', the door opened once again. Obviously there was nothing worthwhile on television at the moment. Jolene was wearing a white tank top and had swapped her sweatpants for shorts with a camouflage spot pattern. Her red sandals had such high heels that any other woman would probably have fallen over in them. However, Jolene moved unerringly across the street towards the guest house.

Bob thought Jolene resembled a battered imitation Barbie doll. "I'd love to comment on this sight," he quipped, "but she's your aunt, Jupe."

"Thank you for being so considerate," said the First Investigator sternly.

"Well... you're related only by marriage." Bob grinned. "Fancy her being your aunt... I think she's in her late twenties at the most!"

"—And therefore clearly too old for you!" Jupiter gave him a bitter look. "Anyone who messes with her is kicked off the team!"

"Calm down, Jupe!" said Bob indignantly. "I'm only joking!"

Two women's voices sounded in the hallway—Clementine's and Jolene's.

"Babe, I'm exhausted. Can I have a coffee? Our machine has finally gone bonkers."

"No problem. Drinks are next to the buffet—coffee on the left, mate tea on the right."

Jolene entered the dining room, and was taken aback when she saw the two boys. "Oops! What are you doing here?"

"Breakfast," Jupiter said.

"Oh!" Jolene muttered.

Jupiter forced himself to smile. "Actually, we're pretty much done with that. We stayed a little longer in Carmine Falls because I didn't get a chance to really talk to Uncle Perceval yesterday."

Jolene returned the smile. When she wasn't staring at the TV, she seemed immediately sympathetic. "That's great! Percy shouldn't make such a fuss. I don't know what he's up to, but it can't be that important." She rolled her eyes. "I mean, it's not like he's a big-time businessman or anything."

"What about Leland?" asked Bob as he put the plates together.

"He's just staying with us," Jolene replied.

Bob put on his most charming smile after all and hoped that Jupiter didn't notice from where he was sitting. "What does he do all day?"

"Not much," Jolene admitted. "Right now he's meditating and listening to a CD of annoying dolphin songs. I think he's just cracked up after all that."

Just then, Clementine appeared. "You know each other?"

"Yes!" Jolene beamed. "Jasper is my nephew!"

"Jupiter," corrected the First Investigator, "but nephew is right."

Clementine looked from Jolene to Jupiter and back again. "Okay," she said slowly, "but then clearly from Percy's family... I don't see any resemblance between you two!"

"He's on Percy's side, of course!" said Jolene emphatically.

Clementine now looked at Jupiter closely. "Sure... I should have noticed that right away."

Jolene grabbed a cup and turned to Clementine. "While I'm here, I'd like you to attend to my earlobes."

"Why? Have your ear holes closed?"

"Nah! I want two new ones!"

"What? Aren't two on each side enough for you?"

"Hey, you're missing out on a deal here!" Jolene sounded a bit venomous.

"Well, okay," Clementine replied. "I'll go get my little bag."

When Clementine had left the room, Jolene turned to the boys and asked guilelessly: "So what have you planned for today?"

"We're going to visit my uncle." Jupiter smiled hypocritically.

"Great!" Jolene poured herself some coffee and bent curiously over the buffet.

However, before she could take anything, Clementine was back. “Jo, come out here to the verandah,” she called through the open door.

Jolene picked up her coffee mug and nodded to the boys. “See you later then!”

As quickly as her high heels would allow, she hurried out of the dining room. She had disappeared from the boys’ sight for no more than a few seconds when a dull thump sounded, then a clang, and yet another a clang!

Clementine cried out. Jolene hollered. Pete yowled.

“Be careful!”

“Watch it, Buster!”

“Oww... that’s hot!”

When Jupiter rushed into the hallway, Jolene was just getting up. A mug lay broken beside her, and Pete was sitting on the floor, next to a puddle of coffee.

“It’s not so bad.” Clementine had recovered from the fright. She picked up her little bag that she had dropped in the collision with the other two. “I’ll get a rag.”

“I have to save my sandals!” whined Jolene. “They’re full of coffee splashes.”

“Come with me, Jo. I have this brilliant cleaning stuff from the supermarket.” Clementine disappeared into a utility room next to the kitchen.

“All right, Pete?” asked Bob.

Pete stood up slowly. “I had too much momentum and slipped on the stairs. Then I sailed through the air—like in the cave.”

“Just don’t make a habit of these flying manoeuvres.” Jupiter bent down and picked up the broken pieces of the mug. In doing so, he also found a small tablet bottle. Pete might have dropped it during the collision. Jupiter wiped the coffee off the label and pocketed it. As the First Investigator stood back up with his hands full, there was almost a second collision. Mr Greene had come down the stairs.

“Take it easy, young man,” the gentleman in the tweed suit said. He circled the puddle of coffee on the floor. Then he looked at his watch—a rather classy model. “Is breakfast over already?”

“No, no. Mrs Weed is just busy. Feel free to help yourself to the buffet.” Jupiter nodded at the man. Then he threw the shards into the bin in the kitchen and stepped out onto the verandah where his friends were already waiting. Jolene was rubbing a sponge on her sandals.

“I’m sorry,” Pete apologized to Jolene. “I had a fall yesterday and haven’t been quite myself since. I was just upstairs to get my tablet bottle and then I rushed down—”

“It’s okay.” Jolene looked at her sandals. “I think the stains are gone.”

“The cleaning agent is ingenious, isn’t it?” Clementine now stepped out onto the verandah with a mop in her hand. “So what are you boys up to today?”

“We’re going over to my uncle’s garage to check out the items there,” Jupiter replied.

Jolene laughed out. “I’ll be glad when the junk is gone. Percy won’t throw anything away.”

Before The Three Investigators had even reached the Abernathys’ house, Leland and Perceval came out and saw them.

Jupiter’s uncle stared at the boys in horror. “What are you still doing here?”

“There wasn’t enough time yesterday to look at all the items in your garage,” Jupiter explained. “That’s why we would like to continue today.”

“Great!” exclaimed Leland. It sounded rushed. “Go ahead. The garage is open.”

The men then headed towards Perceval’s dented Chevrolet.

“Can we get some drinks from your fridge?” Jupe asked. “It’s a warm day today,”

“Yes, yes.” Perceval, without hesitation, threw him a bunch of keys. It missed the First Investigator by a metre. “You can go into the house. Later, give the keys to Jo. She should be back in a minute anyway.” Then he slammed the car door.

Pete picked up the bunch of keys and handed them to Juve. “They’re in a hurry!”

“—And they are mighty concerned about something,” Bob added quietly.

“You’d think they are on the run.” Pete remarked.

“Are we going to follow them?” Bob asked with a sideways glance at Jupiter.

Juve did not answer immediately but looked at the Chevrolet leaving. This time the men did not turn onto the country road towards the cave, but roared off in the opposite direction at clearly too high a speed.

“Not this time,” Jupiter finally answered. “Since my uncle has left, and my aunt is having her ears pierced, we might as well check out their place.”

Pete opened the garage and sceptically looked at the pile of junk. “We’re going to need a full day to inspect these things.”

“Can you two start first?” asked Jupiter.

“—And what are you doing while we work?” Bob asked.

The First Investigator jingled Perceval’s bunch of keys. “I’ll look inside the house!”

The Abernathys’ house would have been perfect for a TV programme for home renovation, where interior designers showcased their talents in refurbishing unsightly dwellings. Viewers could then compare the ‘before’ and ‘after’ versions. Obviously, the current state of the Abernathys’ house would be the ‘before’ version. It was gloomy, untidy and lovelessly decorated.

However, Jupiter was not an interior designer. He was an investigator, and he knew what to look for in a house search. He needed clues to a crime. Sometimes small details that other people overlooked were enough.

The first thing Juve did was to search the rubbish bins throughout the house. He also quickly looked in the cupboards. He did not find anything in the kitchen or the living room. Then he proceeded to Leland’s room.

The furnishings were clearly not Leland’s, as they looked a bit girlish. There were men’s clothes everywhere. Between some old socks, Jupiter discovered the CD *Relaxation by the Sea*. However, what he found under the bed was more interesting. Apart from slippers and a pair of jeans, there was a long-sleeved shirt and on it, Jupiter clearly saw red stains—blood! With a pounding heart, he put the shirt back in its place.

Unfortunately, the First Investigator could not find any other clues in the room. Leland apparently owned next to nothing.

Finally, Jupiter went to the first floor and continued the search there. The bedroom of Perceval and Jolene was in chaos. Every surface in the small room was cluttered—overflowing ashtrays, empty coffee cups, small and large handbags, deodorant bottles without caps, magazines, used towels, plastic bags and a fragrance lamp on which a grey layer of dust had already formed. The bedside tables were also hidden under piles of clutter. On the bed, there was a closed laptop connected to a charging cable. It was an old model that had seen better days.

Jupiter did not hesitate and flipped the laptop open. A wallpaper with a large green leaf appeared. The First Investigator had braced himself for password protection, but he could access everything unhindered. Perceval apparently thought nothing of securing his laptop.

As Jupiter quickly discovered, his uncle had not written any e-mails for almost two days, nor had he received any interesting ones. The folders on the desktop contained unsorted documents. Jupiter could not possibly go through everything so he decided to open the

Internet browser and look at the browsing history. Again, Perceval had not thought to cover his tracks and had not deleted the browsing history of the last few days. Jupiter could see exactly which websites his uncle had visited... and that was quite interesting. In particular, there was a page that explained how much blood one could lose without dying. Perceval had also looked up an address. It was a train station near the coast, barely an hour and a half by car from Carmine Falls. Then there were several pages of legends and mysteries. Perceval had apparently searched extensively for a certain 'Chalice of Destiny'.

Jupiter raised his eyebrows. This chalice had been mentioned by his uncle the previous night! Quickly he clicked on one of the pages. It was about a Russian goldsmith named Ruvim Kuznetsov:

... In 1902, Kuznetsov completed his work on the legendary Chalice of Destiny. It is an uncanny masterpiece made from gold, platinum, blood jasper, ivory, nephrite, onyx, cobalt glass and rubies. It is said that Kuznetsov sealed the chalice with blood and tears...

Further along the text, this chalice was described as a magical drinking vessel. In more recent times, it was thought to be lost, but no details were given in the article.

Jupe looked up. Was his uncle looking for this chalice? Or had he already found it and had it hidden? Perhaps, in the Carmine Caves?

8. Dangerous Investigations

“No!” Pete snapped. He was standing next to a worn-out dresser which he had just cleared of dust and cobwebs.

“You refuse to go to the cave with us?” Jupiter looked at his friend reproachfully.

“Right!” Pete held his gaze. “I need to rest my wrist... and my nerves.”

“Okay,” Jupiter said surprisingly. “Then we have to redistribute the tasks in our team for the duration of this case.”

Pete laughed. “Fine... I’ll take on your role and assign the tasks.”

Jupiter ignored the remark. “As Second Investigator, Bob is now responsible for sporting operations and you, Pete, will take over Records and Research.”

“Nope!” Pete said.

“Yes, I insist!” Jupiter countered. “—Otherwise we will not make any progress in this case.”

Pete had to relent, as usual. “Okay, Master Investigator. What do you want me to do?”

“You wait here for Jolene and give her back the keys,” Jupiter instructed. “Then you make your way to the diner in the town centre. The coverage is pretty bad here, but I guess there’s free Wi-Fi in the diner.”

“So what am I supposed to find out?”

“Everything about Leland Hanson,” Jupiter said. “I’ll also write down a few more keywords for you to check. By the way, we’ll need your car key.”

“As you say, your highness.” Pete sighed, took out his car key, and tossed it to the First Investigator.

When Jupe and Bob had left, Pete put some brooms back into the garage. His hand still hurt and the work took much longer one-handed. Without Bob’s help, he wouldn’t have managed to even clean the dresser. He was just about to throw a rag into the rubbish bin when a deep voice sounded behind him.

“Hey, kid! What are you doing here?”

Pete turned around. Bootsie T. Washington stood at the garage entrance and glared at him.

“I’m cleaning up,” he replied hastily. “Mr Abernathy has hired me and my friends.”

“A lie, nothing more.”

“Excuse me?”

“That is a blatant lie! From my property, I can’t see the whole driveway...” Bootsie slowly came closer. “—But I can very well hear what is being said.”

“That’s nice, isn’t it?” said Pete.

Bootsie was old and frail, but he still had something of a lion about him... and at that moment, Pete felt like a wounded gazelle that had fallen into a trap. He took two steps back, but Bootsie kept closing in.

“You’re not here to clean up.” Bootsie was now standing directly in front of Pete. In the semi-darkness of the garage, his eyes gleamed particularly eerily. “So don’t lie to me! Every lie is an evil spirit you send into the world.”

Pete thought for a brief moment on how to respond to this. He was checking items in the garage with permission from the owner. So what right did this old man have to question what Pete was doing? Should he just tell the old man off? That might not be a good idea. After all, they were virtually on the same side. Both Bootsie and the three boys wanted to find out what the blood stains in Leland's Jeep were all about...

Then should Pete tell the old man that he and his friends were investigators? He reached into his pocket with his unscathed hand. Inside was the business card of The Three Investigators. Should he show it to Bootsie? However, something made him hesitate.

"What have you got there?" Bootsie didn't miss a beat. "Show me your hand!"

"Well, I..." Pete swallowed and took another step back.

"I never ask twice, boy!"

"Well, okay." Pete handed Bootsie the card. The old man held it up to the light and read. It said:



"Investigators?" Bootsie remarked. "What are you doing here?"

"We are doing the very investigation that your sheriff came here to do."

"Why?" Bootsie asked before handing the card back to Pete.

"—Because we're investigators."

"Who commissioned you?"

Pete felt the wall at his back. "No one. It's... a personal matter. Actually, it's about my friend's uncle."

All at once Bootsie turned away from the Second Investigator. "Bella is waiting for her walk. Why don't you come by my place later? All three of you."

Pete just nodded silently. It dawned on him that it had not been a good idea to show Bootsie the card. The old man was unpredictable, but now he had no choice but to continue cleaning things up in the garage. Jolene would surely come soon and then he could leave this place. He bent down and picked up a screwdriver from the dirty floor.

Suddenly, he heard a noise behind him. Was that the rustling of clothes? Bare feet on the concrete floor? Before Pete could turn around, he received a blow to his head. Then everything around him went dark.

"Where are we going to park?" Bob asked when they were about to reach the rest area.

"Not at the car park for sure," Jupe said. "We cannot let anyone know we are here. Go further on. There is a turn to a side road. We'll park at the same place I parked last night."

Both boys then made their way to the rest area. Jupe now had his backpack, and Bob carried over his shoulder a rolled-up rope that he had found in Perceval's garage.

At the car park, there were no vehicles there. Straight away, both of them went on the hiking trail to Carmine Falls. Then came the slope and moments later, they reached the small

plateau.

"This is the way in!" Bob pointed to the cave entrance.

Jupiter pulled out his flashlight. "According to Pete, he wasn't far inside the cave. He merely followed this passageway. We have to be careful, though. It's supposed to drop steeply down after just a few metres."

Jupiter led the way, followed by Bob, who had now also switched on his flashlight. The rough rock walls arched so low above them that they could only advance in a crouched position.

Bob's stomach tingled. Descending into an unknown cave was exciting enough in itself, but here came the added uncertainty of what they would find down there.

As they carefully descended a sloping part of the passageway, the uncomfortable feeling grew stronger. Now not only was Bob's stomach making itself known, the back of his neck was tingling as well. Here, in the darkness, the whole venture suddenly seemed dangerous and reckless.

However, Jupiter had already reached the bottom and was lighting up the chamber they were in. It was hardly bigger than a living room. Two human-sized passageways led away in different directions.

Jupiter pointed his flashlight at one part of the rock wall. "Look over there!"

Bob slowly stepped closer. In front of him was a niche that was just big enough to accommodate a stretched-out person.

Bob then took a step back. "Pete must have fallen somewhere here," he surmised. "His flashlight rolled across the ground and he could see a shadow or something in the niche for a split-second. Then his flashlight went out."

"Here!" Jupe shone his light on the ground. "That might actually be blood."

"You mean there really was someone here?"

"That's what we have to check," Jupiter said. He bent down and found some blood-stained pebbles. He also examined the ground around the stains. Then he took out a piece of cloth and two small plastic bags. He used the cloth to pick up some traces and placed them in the plastic bags.

"We'll examine these later." Jupiter held out the two plastic bags to Bob. One contained the small blood-stained pebbles, the other something Bob couldn't make out in the sparse light. He narrowed his eyes.

"Two long black hairs," Jupiter pointed out, "and a few crumbs. Looks like damp clay."

"This could be from other hikers."

"The soil around the cave is not clay," Jupe explained, "and note that such clay was also present in Leland's Jeep."

"What does this prove?"

"It's more like a clue," Jupiter said. "When Pete was finally able to switch his flashlight back on, he only had a quick look around, otherwise he could have found these traces of blood and hair."

Bob gathered up all his courage and bent into the niche. "Oh!" he said in surprise.

"What is it?"

"Look, Jupe!"

On one side, the niche reached deeper into the rock than expected, and it ended at a hole. On closer inspection, it was an entrance to a narrow tunnel that seemed to go further into the rock. A slender person could probably squeeze through there and disappear completely into the tunnel. It was an ideal hiding place.

“Interesting,” Jupiter said immediately. “That should explain the sudden disappearance of the person. When Pete’s flashlight went off, the person couldn’t have fled silently past him to one of the passageways, but there should have been enough time to disappear quickly into this tunnel.”

Bob had little desire to check this out. He fervently hoped that Jupiter would not get the idea of investigating this tunnel. Since the First Investigator was a little stouter, this task would be left to Bob alone.

The First Investigator went alongside the niche and, contrary to what Bob had thought, the First Investigator managed to squeeze through to the tunnel opening. “We can’t rule out the possibility that someone is down there in that tunnel even at this very moment.”

Bob raised both hands. “You know I’m not a coward, but I’m not going in there! Who knows where the tunnel leads to and what awaits us at the other end.”

“I admit that an expedition here could be dangerous,” Jupe explained, “but we should at least look around more extensively in the accessible parts of the cave. After all, it is a widely ramified system with several entrances. We should check them out and look for more clues.”

“Whatever...” Bob mumbled, “but only if we make trail markers for safety!” Just like his colleagues, he always carried a piece of chalk to leave marks or secret messages. Sighing, he reached into his trouser pocket, took out his green chalk, and followed his friend into the darkness.

“Babe! Hey, babe! Geez, wake up!”

Pete blinked. His head ached and the world around him smelled obtrusively of artificial strawberry aroma and cold cigarette smoke. Slowly he opened his eyes. Directly in front of him was Jolene.

“Babe! How are you?”

“Where am I?”

“In the garage.”

Groaning, Pete sat up. “Someone attacked me!”

Jolene looked at him in horror. “Here?”

“Where else?” groaned the Second Investigator.

“I really can’t believe that. Who would do such a thing?”

Cautiously, Pete rubbed his booming head. “Have you seen anyone?”

Jolene shook her head, but then she suddenly stopped in mid-motion. “Our neighbour just came across the road—with his dog.”

“Bootsie Washington?”

“That’s the one,” Jolene said. Now she sounded annoyed. “He’s crazy! He’s always besieging us. Percy thinks he’s even going through our rubbish.”

“He was here in the garage earlier too.”

Jolene looked confused. “Percy?”

“No, Mr Washington.”

“Percy has forbidden him to enter our property!” Jolene was incensed. “It was obvious he wouldn’t comply.”

“—But why would he knock me down?” asked Pete.

“Why would the old man stick advisory messages under Clementine’s windscreen wipers?” Jolene asked. “—Or leave weird granny clothes on my doorstep so I can get dressed properly for once?”

“He does?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what he does.” Jolene stood up and pointed to the floor. “What’s this all about?”

Right next to the Second Investigator, someone had written ‘8th Commandment’ in spidery letters on the floor—in blue chalk. Pete almost automatically reached into his left trouser pocket.

His chalk was gone! With difficulty, he rummaged through the rest of his pockets. No chalk! Also missing were the business cards of The Three Investigators and the bottle with the pain relief tablets. However, his wallet and mobile phone were still there.

“Commandments are from the church, aren’t they?” asked Jolene.

“Yes,” Pete said. He thought for a moment. “The 8th commandment is about not lying.”

“Bootsie is on a permanent crusade. He’s a member of the Church of the Free Spirit.”

“I did not lie!” Pete was indignant.

“Really? Never?” Jolene marvelled. “Wow!”

Pete sighed. “I mean I didn’t lie to Mr Washington.”

“Bootsie is completely gaga.” Jolene laughed out. “If you’re all right, I’m going in. The new season of *Dracula Girls* is about to start.”

Pete handed Jolene the keys, then remained in the garage, perplexed. He checked his pockets again just to confirm that his chalk, the tablet bottle, and the business cards were gone.

Pete pulled out his mobile phone and took a photo of the writing on the floor. His head ached and his wrist throbbed. He sat down on a bench and tried to figure out what had happened. Whatever was going on here, he first needed fresh air and a place where he could think in peace.

On wobbly legs, he left the garage.

9. Pete Does Research

At the diner, Pete ordered a slice of apple pie and a milkshake. He had to fortify himself before doing any research.

From his seat, he could overlook both the main street and the entire diner. Apart from him, there were only two other customers. They were staring at the television, where a sports programme was on.

Soon Pete was also engrossed in the programme. Sport was so much easier than investigation work. There were clear rules, clear winners and clear losers, and when the final whistle sounded, it was over. Time passed and finally Pete felt guilty. Bob would have started researching long ago.

When the sports programme was replaced by *Celebrity Time*, Pete finally got his act together. He didn't want to watch another instalment about desperate celebrities. Since a muddy landslide on the coastal road had damaged the villas of several stars and starlets, the media had hardly focussed on anything else—even though no one had been injured in the slide. In fact, there had been worse natural disasters in California.

The Second Investigator, who, strictly speaking, was now assigned to do research, took a folded piece of paper out of the back pocket of his jeans. Bootsie had apparently not discovered it after his attack.

Pete glanced at Jupiter's handwriting. He was supposed to find out more about Leland Hanson, then look up a thing called the Chalice of Destiny, plus information about a train station near Colitas Canyon.

Instead of tediously reading on his mobile phone, Pete could use an ageing computer that was available to diner patrons—just like old times.

He typed 'Leland Hanson' into the search engine. Already the results were displayed to him. Apparently there were numerous Leland Hansons in the US. Finding the right one was almost impossible. Pete wondered how Bob always managed to get detailed information about people.

As for the train station, at least he found the right one on the first try. The question, however, was what he should make a note of. Colitas Station was an ordinary station and was a good 80-minute drive from Carmine Falls on the Pacific coast. There was a car park, bicycle racks, a waiting hall, a kiosk, two telephone booths, thirty small and ten large lockers and a public toilet. Also, the station facilities were accessible by wheelchair users and those with limited mobility.

Pete shifted uneasily in his chair. This research was completely pointless! Nevertheless, he still entered 'Chalice of Destiny' into the search engine.

Pete then left the diner and walked back to Carmine Inn. As he was about to reach the guest house, he saw Bootsie Washington across the street. Bella was sniffing devotedly at a lamp post. The dark-skinned old man had his eyes half-closed and looked as if he were in a trance.

Pete crossed the street with determination. "Hey, Mr Washington! Did you knock me down at your neighbour's garage this morning?"

Bootsie's gaze darkened. Pete would not have thought it possible that the old man could look any more piercing. He cleared his throat.

"Did you hit me on the head with a heavy object? I have a big bruise now!"

"What makes you think it was me?" asked Bootsie in his deep, grating voice. "Why would I do that?"

"How should I know?" Pete shrugged. "There was a message scribbled on the floor that said '8th Commandment'."

"My goodness!" cried Bootsie, raising his hands to the sky. "One reference to the Ten Commandments and I'm a suspect?"

"After all, you do send such messages to Clementine Weed."

"Why not? Someone has to show this lost soul the right way, otherwise she'll end up in prison, and no one in this town wants that."

"So who else would have knocked me down?"

"You're an investigator," Bootsie replied. "Go figure it out! I'd start with the people who might object to your investigation."

"Leland and Perceval!" said Pete. "Sure, but they've gone away. Besides, they have no idea that we are investigators."

"Do you know that for sure?"

"Not directly," Pete admitted hesitantly, "but they wouldn't refer to the Ten Commandments, would they?"

"They were sent to Sunday school when they were boys," Bootsie revealed. "Maybe something stuck there."

"You've had your eye on Leland for some time, haven't you?"

"I don't trust him," Bootsie said grimly. "Even as a boy he incited others with his nonsense. Percy and his sister Carol were always hanging around with him." He shook his head thoughtfully. "That was a long time ago. What has remained are the problems. The Abernathys have them all the time—even without him. Right now I'm just concerned about that young lady. She's a lamb among wolves."

"She didn't make an unhappy impression on me," Pete said.

"You and your friends come all the way to this town," Bootsie said. "Tell me, why are you involved with my neighbours? Is one of you related to them?"

"Uh, yeah..." Pete wondered how much he should be telling Bootsie. "Perceval Abernathy is Jupe's uncle."

"The dark-haired one with the strong build?"

"Yeah," Pete muttered.

"I guessed as much," Bootsie continued. "There are a few similarities between your friend and Percy..." He paused and stared at the neighbouring property. There stood Jolene, talking to Jupiter and Bob. "Why don't you come by to my place later?"

The man eyed Jupiter's aunt's outfit disapprovingly for a moment, then made his way to his house. Pete just stood there looking at the old man leaving.

"We heard about the attack on you!" Bob approached the Second Investigator. "You okay?"

"Nothing so serious," Pete mumbled.

Now Jupiter also joined them. "May I ask why you were just talking to the man who knocked you down?"

"It was part of my investigation," Pete said.

"Then you can tell us about it at your leisure," Bob suggested. "Jolene invited us. We can go up to her attic and look through Jupe's mother's things. While we're there, we can tell you

what we discovered in the Carmine Caves.”

Pete rubbed his forehead and looked once more at Bootsie’s house. He couldn’t make up his mind. Was the old man harmless, dangerous or just plain crazy? It was hard to tell.

Jupiter went up the narrow stairs. He had mixed feelings about it. The attic was fine for a meeting. However, he was reluctant to look at his mother’s things in the presence of his friends. He knew so little about Catherine Jones that he did not want to share the scanty knowledge with others. Half-heartedly, Jupiter grabbed a photo album.

“Who are they?” asked Pete, pointing to a picture of a woman and two young girls.

“My mother with her sister Caroline and my grandmother... I guess.” Jupiter narrowed his eyes. It almost looked as if his aunt was also wearing a necklace with a star pendant around her neck. The First Investigator thought of the pendant he had found in Leland’s Jeep. Had it perhaps been Caroline’s pendant? However, Caroline was no longer alive, just as Jupe’s mother.

Jupiter closed the album as Pete was already leaning forward curiously.

“There is no time for photos now,” said the First Investigator. “Let’s start evaluating the results of the investigation.”

“We suspect you really did see someone in the Carmine Caves!” whispered Bob. When he saw Pete’s face, he quickly added: “Someone alive.”

“Okay,” Pete said.

“We have thoroughly examined the niche inside the cave,” Bob continued. “There is an entrance to a tunnel there. That’s where the person could have disappeared to. We also found black hair and pieces of clay.”

“What about the blood stains?”

“I don’t have equipment to confirm that conclusively, but I’m guessing it was blood,” Jupiter stated quietly. “By the way, I also found red stains on a shirt in Leland’s room this morning.”

“Just like there’s the blood and lumps of clay in his Jeep,” Bob added.

“Leland and Perceval most likely hid an injured person in the Carmine Caves,” Jupiter concluded. “This is supported by both the blood stains and the fact that Perceval desperately needed pain relief tablets—even though Jolene had just bought some.”

“—But then why didn’t you find this injured person in the cave?” Pete asked.

“—Because the Carmine Caves are widely branched and difficult to access,” Jupiter replied. “We found two additional exits on the other side of the slope. Inside the cave, we went through at least five large chambers and numerous passageways, shafts and crevices. My flashlight went off after half an hour. We couldn’t risk losing Bob’s flashlight as well, so we headed back.”

“Maybe the person ventured into the cave and got lost,” Bob suggested.

“Whichever way we look at it, we need solid evidence.” Jupiter turned to Pete. “What were you able to find out?”

“Unfortunately, I couldn’t find out anything about Leland,” Pete admitted, “because there are several people of the same name nationwide.”

“Now don’t tell me you were just looking for the name,” Bob queried him.

“Shh!” Jupe hissed energetically.

Pete raised his hands. “What else was I supposed to do? Call some office?”

Bob raised his eyebrows. “You have to try different combinations, for example, ‘Leland Hanson and Carmine Falls’ or ‘Leland Hanson and crime’. Keywords like ‘accident’,

‘police’, ‘arrested’, ‘burglary’ or ‘suspicion’ are also good.”

“How should I know?” Pete defended himself. “I’m usually the Second Investigator!”

“Have you found out anything else that will help us?” Jupiter interrupted his friends.

“Yes, I did,” said Pete. “The train station is just a building with a car park and a waiting hall. It is not very big, but very nicely situated.”

“What do you mean by ‘nicely situated’?” Jupe asked.

“There’s a great surfing beach nearby,” Pete replied. “By the way, that landslide that is shown on TV many times is just around the corner. The railway line was not affected though.”

“I see,” Bob remarked, but he didn’t sound very enthusiastic.

“—But that wasn’t all,” Pete said quickly. “I also read something about the Chalice of Destiny. It’s over a hundred years old and is considered lost. Thirty years ago, it was stolen. After that, it never reappeared. It is said to be very valuable.”

“How valuable?” Jupiter enquired.

“The value was not specifically stated,” Pete explained, “only that it was made by a Russian goldsmith who made several chalices at about the same time—the Chalice of Temperance, the Chalice of Wisdom, and so on. I saw a picture of one of them. It was decorated with gems and had traditional engravings and patterns. Anyway, they’re all supposedly worth more or less the same. The Chalice of Justice was auctioned off a few years ago.”

“Well?” asked Bob. “For how much?”

Pete paused meaningfully. Then he said, “—For four million dollars!”

10. Water Damage

Bob's eyes snapped open. "Four million dollars? Are you sure the text was talking about dollars?"

"Yes," Pete replied, "for sure it was not Russian rubles!"

A cry sounded from below. "Help!"

"Your aunt!" Bob exclaimed.

Immediately, The Three Investigators started moving. One by one, they climbed down the narrow stairs from the attic.

"Help!" it sounded a second time. Jolene stood at the washbasin in the bathroom. A fountain of water rushed towards her and she was soaked from her hair down.

"The tap broke off!" she wailed as the boys rushed into the bathroom.

"We have to close the main tap!" Pete decided, while Bob stooped and made his way to the washbasin.

"This ramshackle house!" complained Jolene. "Everything's falling apart!"

Jupiter meanwhile looked around the bathroom. "I can't see a main tap here."

"I'll look in the basement," Pete said.

"We don't have a basement!" Jolene lowered herself onto the edge of the bathtub. Her eye make-up was smeared with wetness. "Percy doesn't care about anything! Everything here is falling apart."

"We'll fix it," Pete promised. Together, the boys managed to stop the water supply after finding the main tap behind a flap in the wall. The washbasin tap itself, however, had come off.

Jolene looked like she was about to start crying, but then she pulled herself together. "You're all wet!"

Pete looked down at himself, then looked at Jolene. "You too."

"We still have several boxes of old clothes in the attic," Jupiter's aunt said. "I'll find you some... and then I'll hang your clothes out to dry. Fortunately, things dry quickly in the sun."

Jupiter reached into his trouser pocket. His white chalk had become wet and so had his business cards.

"Just leave your stuff here," Jolene suggested. "I'll go get the clothes."

She had barely stepped out of the door when voices sounded on the ground floor. Perceval and Leland had returned. It was obvious from the way they were talking that something was wrong.

"I'm looking upstairs!" Perceval called out in a strained voice. Already frantic footsteps could be heard coming up the stairs. "What happened—" He paused.

"The tap came off!" said Jolene. "—And don't look at me so reproachfully!"

"I don't look reproachful," Perceval replied. "But—oh, never mind. I'm having a dreadful day." He peered through the open door into the bathroom and spotted The Three Investigators. His features faltered. Whether this was due to the flooded bathroom or the boys' presence, it was hard to tell.

"Babe, what's wrong?" Jolene put a hand on her husband's arm.

"I'll tell you later," Perceval replied. "I have to look for something urgently."

Five minutes later, The Three Investigators put on dry clothes. They were rather unfashionable shirts and corduroy trousers that smelled musty.

"I can't look like this!" Pete proclaimed.

"Hmm..." Jupiter mumbled, lost in thought. He picked up his wet jeans and took out the items one by one from the pockets and stuffed them into the corduroy trousers that he was now wearing. The last item was the tablet bottle, which he had forgotten to return to Pete.

"Here, Pete," he said and handed his friend the bottle.

"Hey, where did you get my tablet bottle?" Pete asked in surprise.

"It fell out of your pocket when you clashed with the two ladies in the hallway," Jupe replied. "I picked it up but forgot to give it back to you earlier."

"Now wait a minute," Pete wondered out loud. "I thought this bottle was taken from me after I was bashed on the head in the garage."

"Can't be..." Jupe said. "I had it all this while."

"Oh well, whatever..." Pete mumbled and stuffed the tablet bottle into the pocket of his shapeless corduroy trousers.

"Don't take too much of that stuff," Bob warned.

"Yeah, yeah..." Pete replied. "I'm much better now."

Just then, Jolene came and took the boys' wet clothes out for drying.

Just as she reached the ground floor, Perceval came up to her. "Hey, Jo... have you seen a key by any chance?"

The Three Investigators were just coming down the stairs and were listening tensely.

"Your bunch of keys is at the usual place next to the telephone," the young woman replied. "The tall, brown-haired boy gave it back to me earlier."

Before Perceval could respond, Leland appeared. His lip was bruised. He looked suspiciously at The Three Investigators, then walked past them. "Percy!"

"What is it?"

"Just come!"

The men disappeared into Leland's room and turned on the radio loudly.

"They don't want us to eavesdrop!" whispered Pete.

"I'll be upstairs blow-drying my hair," Jolene said sullenly. She left the boys alone in the living room.

Jupiter put an ear to the door of Leland's room. The conversation behind it was not that loud, and only a few particularly angry words reached him:

"Too gullible!"

"Catastrophe!"

"Traitor!"

Perceval's voice rolled over. Leland yelled something that sounded like "Your nephew!"

A new song started on the radio—this time with so much bass that the conversation was completely lost in the noise. Just as well, Jupiter gave up the eavesdropping.

"Meeting in the garage!" he told his two friends.

"The 8th commandment," Jupiter said thoughtfully as the three of them gathered in the garage. "So the question is, who are you supposed to have lied to?"

Pete shrugged his shoulders. "Not to Bootsie... Perhaps we didn't tell your uncle and Leland that we were investigators."

"Could it be that someone wants to keep us away from this garage?" suggested Bob.

Pete looked at his friends indecisively. “—But the attacker didn’t have to steal the chalk and the business cards for that.”

“If the attacker took the business cards, then he would already know that we are investigators,” Bob concluded. “Either he really felt lied to as a result, or the scribble on the floor was intended to draw suspicion specifically to Bootsie.”

“Both are conceivable,” Jupe said. “The question remains who else could have done it. We don’t know where Perceval and Leland were at the time of the incident. We also have to put a question mark over Clementine... and then there’s the injured person in the cave.”

“—And your Aunt Jolene,” Bob added.

“I don’t think she has a clue what’s going on,” Pete said. “Bootsie even thinks she needs saving from Perceval and Leland.”

“In any case, my aunt also belongs on the list of suspects,” Jupe stated.

“Do you think there’s a connection with that Chalice of Destiny?” asked Bob. “Could Perceval and Leland have stolen it?”

“It’s hard to say,” Jupiter said, “but if it is so, we’re talking about an art object worth several million dollars.”

“It might be hidden in the Carmine Caves!” added Pete. “—With someone guarding it.”

“That is possible,” Jupiter said, “but we must not be tempted to jump to conclusions. We only know individual pieces of the puzzle so far, not the whole picture. In any case, we should be on our guard. If it really is about this chalice, further investigations could be quite dangerous. People have committed capital crimes for considerably less money.”

11. Something is Wrong

The front door was slammed with momentum. Shortly afterwards, Leland angrily stomped towards his Jeep. When he went past the front of the garage, he saw The Three Investigators. He paused and called out: "Hey, you guys are needed inside the house."

"What is it about?" Jupiter asked.

"Ask Percy. I have to go urgently—to an appointment." Leland unlocked his car, got in, and immediately rummaged around in the glove compartment.

The three boys walked to the house and went in. The television was on again in the living room but no one was sitting in front of it. Jolene was standing around in the kitchen corner in a T-shirt that was much too big. Her hair was still wet.

"I've had enough!" she shouted to Perceval, who was apparently still in Leland's room. "You're hiding something from me."

Jupe signalled to his friends to remain in the hallway just outside the kitchen so that they could eavesdrop on the conversation.

"It's nothing, Jo! Lee just fell," Perceval called from the room. It sounded like he was moving a heavy object.

"Fell?" Jolene snorted. She rummaged a packet of cigarettes out of a drawer and put one in her mouth, but without lighting it. She hadn't spotted The Three Investigators yet. "It has something to do with Mercury, right?"

"What makes you think of that?"

"It always has something to do with Mercury!" she replied irritably.

The next moment, Jolene walked out of the kitchen with a cup in her hand. When she saw the three boys, she startled briefly before slumping her shoulders. "Yeah?"

"We were told to come into the house," Bob said.

"Really?" Jolene looked at him questioningly. "You'll have to ask Percy." She sighed. "No one here tells me much." Then she went into the living room and sat down in front of the television.

"Wait a minute, I have to do something," Jupiter whispered to his friends.

The First Investigator turned to the small window that was right next to the front door and peered through it. He couldn't see Leland's Jeep from here.

Jupe waved Bob over and whispered to him: "Keep an eye on Leland's Jeep. You should be able to see it from here when he leaves the compound. See where he is heading."

Bob nodded curtly, and stood by the window.

Then Jupiter waved Pete over and both of them went back into the living room where Jolene was focussed on some programme on the television.

Jolene noticed the two boys and asked: "Uh, I thought you were going to see Percy..."

"Yes," Jupiter replied, "but I'd like to know something first... I mean, the thing with Mercury."

Jolene shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know... but Mercury is always the main problem."

"May I ask who or what Mercury is?" Jupiter enquired.

“Huh?” Jolene looked at him as if he had asked a completely absurd question. “You don’t know who Mercury is? Sheesh... She’s your cousin!”

“My cousin?” echoed Jupiter in surprise.

“Yesss...” Jolene hissed in annoyance.

“How are we related?” Jupe continued.

“She’s Carol’s daughter!”

“Carol’s daughter?” Jupe was shocked. “Then who is Mercury’s father?”

“My goodness!” Jolene remarked. “Mercury is the daughter of Carol and Lee—Leland!”

“What?” Jupe exclaimed.

“Sheesh...” Jolene hissed. “Welcome to the family, Jasper!”

“It’s Jupiter...”

“Whatever!” Then she stood up and sauntered to the stairs. “I’m finally going to blow-dry my hair.”

“About time to draw up your family tree, Jupe!” Pete laughed. “Cousins Venus and Mars might turn up soon!”

The next moment, Bob burst into the living room and whispered to Jupe: “The old Jeep roared off towards the country road. There is no question that Leland is going to the cave!”

“Okay, Bob,” Jupe said. “You go get Pete’s car and wait for me outside the guest house. I have to see what my uncle wants and then I’ll be with you.”

Bob rushed off. Jupe and Pete then went to Leland’s room where they saw Perceval in the process of ransacking the place. A shelf had tipped over and a suitcase stood open in a corner.

“What do you want?” Perceval asked, visibly caught off guard.

“Uh... Leland asked us to come in here,” Jupe replied.

“Why?”

“He just said that we were needed in the house,” Jupe stated. “No reason was given.”

“I don’t need you guys here,” Perceval snapped. “You just go back to the garage.”

“Before we go, I hope you don’t mind me asking one question,” Jupe said. “What does Mercury have to do with all this?”

Perceval flinched. “What?”

“Mercury is the unknown element in an equation I’d like to solve.”

“Mercury is my niece,” Perceval said hesitantly, “my sister Caroline’s daughter... but she no longer lives in Carmine Falls. I like to bring her to our family reunion. You’ll like her.”

“Is she in the cave?” Jupiter blurted out.

Instead of answering, Perceval took a step towards Jupiter. He looked at him inquiringly. “Did you take the key?”

“I didn’t take anything,” Jupiter replied sharply, “but I know there’s something fishy going on. Leland is going to Carmine Caves right now!”

“We had an argument.”

“—Because of the chalice?” Jupiter looked at his uncle appraisingly.

Perceval looked as if a bucket of cold water had been poured over him. “Don’t tell me that you’re in on this?”

“No,” Jupiter assured him, “but we might be able to help.”

“You’re not interfering!” Perceval raised his hands defensively. “Things are bad enough as it is! I insist that you stay out of it!”

“Just one more question,” Jupe said instead. “Could Leland put Mercury in danger?”

“No, Lee would never hurt her! Quite the opposite! He wants to protect her.”

“From whom?”

“Stop the questions!” Perceval ran both hands through his hair. “Stay out of this! Please!”

“Okay.” Without hesitation, Jupiter left the room. Pete followed him into the hallway, and then out of the house.

“Since when do you give up so easily?” Pete asked.

“I haven’t given up,” Jupe replied and smiled grimly. “We’re not getting anywhere with Perceval right now, so I’m going back to the cave.” Jupe then told Pete to stay in the garage on observation duty as Pete had earlier made a firm stance of not going into the cave again.

“Good luck in the Carmine Caves,” said the Second Investigator, “and come back safely!”

The First Investigator jumped into the awaiting MG with Bob at the wheel. The next moment, the car roared off on another pursuit.

12. Back at the Cave

“There is something wrong,” Bob affirmed.

“Of course there is,” Jupiter said, “and we are going to get to the bottom of it.”

“I noticed that Leland took his time to go off, considering that he has to leave so urgently,” Bob noted.

“Not to mention that he asked us to go into the house when neither Perceval nor Jolene had anything for us.”

“Aha!” Bob exclaimed. “I suppose he did not want us to see where he was heading.”

“—And perhaps follow him,” Jupiter added, “which is exactly what we’re doing.”

“There’s Leland’s Jeep!” Bob exclaimed when he drove past the rest area.

Jupiter glanced over to the car park. Sure enough, the rusty 4-door Cherokee was there. Next to it was a black van with tinted windows.

“Are we going to park at the side road?” Bob asked.

“No,” Jupe decided. “If we go to the cave from here, we will be seen. After all, we don’t know who owns the black van. Maybe Leland was followed on his way here. Therefore, we have to approach the cave entrance from another side. This morning I saw a small road that runs around to the other side of the cave. Go further on, and we will figure out where to stop.”

Bob drove further on and found a paved road that turned sharply to the right. He then worked his way over two flat hills and around several curves.

“I think here is just about right,” Jupe said.

“Are you sure?” Bob asked as he stopped the MG at a spot next to a slope.

“Yes. I’m pretty sure if we climb up the slope here, we can find our way to the cave entrance.” Jupe opened the glove compartment and took out Pete’s spare flashlight. “No time to waste... Come along quick!” he urged Bob as he was getting out of the car.

“This is going to be a sporty climb!” Bob remarked, looking at the slope. Whatever it was, he knew that when Jupiter Jones was hot on a trail, nothing could stop him.

True enough. The next moment, the First Investigator was bursting through the undergrowth like an elephant on rampage. Even when he reached the rocky area, he did not hesitate. Normally Jupiter didn’t care for climbing, but here he had no choice. He just had to avoid looking into the depths.

Groaning, he pulled himself up on a ledge. With one hand firmly and one leg dragging, it worked. Panting, Jupiter worked his way forward. When he finally reached the top, he breathed a sigh of relief. He was sweaty, but he had made it.

A moment later, Bob joined his friend at the top. “Who would have thought of it? Jupiter Jones is becoming a climber!”

“I’m just learning,” Jupiter said. Then he started moving again.

Soon, they were on the rocks above the small plateau. From here, they could see the terrain all the way to the waterfall. Next, the boys had to crawl one after the other through grass and undergrowth.

When they could see the cave entrance, Bob narrowed his eyes. Down in front of the cave entrance was someone! A man in a suit was sitting on a rock. He did not fit in at all with

the natural surroundings there. His dark hair was neatly cut, his tie was perfect and his black shoes were certainly not made for hiking. Yet he sat calmly, with a gun in his hand. The barrel was pointed at Leland, who was standing two metres away.

“If you hurt Mercury, then—”

“Stop threatening, Hanson.” The man in the suit laughed. “You’re in no position to make demands. You’d better come clean.”

“There is nothing else to say,” Leland groaned. “I have already explained everything to you in Colitas Canyon.”

The man shrugged his shoulders. “Then your colleague is playing a game, but I don’t care, as long as I get what I was promised. Mercury and I, we had a deal! I get the chalice, she can leave in return and I would even pay her a nice bonus!”

“Mr Coldfield, please! Mercury is just a child!”

The man in the suit laughed. “She’s a cunning thief, otherwise she wouldn’t have managed to get the chalice in the first place. Even after the landslide, Carver’s treasures must have been exceptionally well secured. Mercury is a pro. Hard to believe she wants to quit before her career has really taken off. That decision is fine with me, as long as she sticks to the deal.”

“Mercury doesn’t have the chalice! And we don’t have it either!” Leland affirmed. His voice rolled over. “Really! The key didn’t fit the locker at all, but couldn’t you just break open all the lockers there? I’m sure you’ll find the chalice then.”

“Why does this sound like a trap to me?” asked Mr Coldfield. “The lockers are under video surveillance, possibly with security alarms. I’m certainly not going to break anything open there. I don’t know if one of you is lying or if you’re all in cahoots, but there’s something fishy going on, otherwise I’d have the chalice by now and you’d have the money.”

Leland looked at the ground in silence. Nothing happened for a few minutes. Jupiter was giving Bob a hand signal to retreat when two other men came out of the cave. One of them was a giant. Both of them were carrying weapons.

“Well?” Mr Coldfield asked.

“Nothing.”

“It’s a maze in there, boss.”

The man in the suit turned to Leland. “Where is her hideout?”

“The last time I saw her, she was In the main chamber just past the entrance there in front,” Leland groaned. “However, she can now be anywhere. The cave system is huge, and Mercury comes out into the open every now and then to get some fresh air. Anyway, I assure you—the chalice is not here!”

“It’s a pain doing business with you, Hanson,” Coldfield said. “If I were you, I’d be worried right now. Believe me, when I want something, I get it.” He turned to his men. “Split up! Moose check the entrances, Hank go back inside the cave. Mercury has to be here somewhere—”

“Yes,” Leland interrupted, “but what’s the point in finding her when I have already told you that the chalice is not here.”

“That you leave it to me,” Coldfield snapped. “When we get her, she will have to tell me where it is.”

“What if she fights back?” asked the giant, who was nervously playing with his gun.

“Force the truth out of her for my sake, but let her live after you get the chalice.”

“Yes, sir,” the giant promised.

“Go now!” Coldfield ordered, “and pronto!”

The stupid trousers slipped, and they scratched. Pete was in the garage pretending to clean something while keeping an eye on the Abernathys' house. However, the trousers kept distracting him. His own jeans were hanging on the terrace at the Abernathys' and were probably still wet. Nevertheless, Pete decided to do something about the hideous trousers first. He had a spare pair of jeans but they were in his room at the guest house. He figured that he could still monitor the Abernathys' house from his room.

Determined not to meet anyone, he decided to enter the guest house from the backyard. Clementine hadn't cleaned up much after her party. Tables with flowery tablecloths stood around, a garland of paper lay on the ground and used glasses and plates were piled up in a box. Although there were certainly more comfortable places than this, the elderly guest in the tweed suit sat in a sun chair reading a book. He smoked a pipe as he did so.

As Pete walked towards the door, the man looked up. "Mrs Weed has gone shopping. There are sandwiches in the fridge."

"Ah, thank you," said Pete. He nodded briefly to the fine gentleman before rushing into the house.

On the stairs, he walked carefully, not wanting to get tangled in his trouser legs again.

A step creaked. Almost at the same time, a noise sounded in one of the rooms. Then came a rustling! Pete stumbled. Was it coming from their room? Now he was even more careful to walk quietly as he made his way up the rest of the creaky steps.

Sure enough, the door of Room 101 was ajar! Pete recalled that he had conscientiously locked it in the morning.

The Second Investigator forced himself to remain calm and listen. Something rustled in the room again. He heard a drawer being opened and then closed back. Then came the whirring of a zip... followed by rustling, crackling and then rustling again.

Someone was searching for something in his room!

13. Caught Red-Handed

Pete thought about it in a flash. Unfortunately, Jupiter had taken the backpack with the anti-theft device with him. Otherwise, the intruder would have been in for a surprise long ago! So Pete had to take care of the surprise attack himself.

He pushed the door open with his right foot. Almost simultaneously he jumped into the room. Someone jumped up. It was a slender person, tall and with dishevelled blonde hair.

“Jolene!”

“Darn!”

“What are you looking for?” Pete asked.

She looked caught. “Uh, yeah.”

“This is our room!”

“Someone took the money from my household cash box—twenty dollars.” Jolene approached slowly. She didn’t wear shoes, and so walked barefoot across the dirty grey carpet. “Did you take the money?”

“Absolutely not!” Pete barked in horror. “We are not thieves after all!”

“I need the money—today!” Jolene stopped close to Pete.

The Second Investigator wondered why all the residents of Carmine Falls were so desperate to get at him—first Bootsie and now Jolene. Nevertheless, he bravely withstood her gaze. “We didn’t take your money. In any case, you can’t just march in here and search our room! How did you even get in?”

“I know where Clementine keeps the spare keys for the rooms. Can you lend me twenty dollars? It’s very urgent!” Jolene looked pleadingly at Pete. “I’ll give it back to you. I promise!”

“Uh, sure,” Pete replied nervously.

“Thank you! You’re a babe!”

“—But I don’t even know if I have that much left.” Pete reached into the pocket of his shapeless corduroy trousers and took out his wallet. In doing so, he accidentally dragged out the tablet bottle which dropped to the floor.

Before the Second Investigator knew it, Jolene had reached down and grabbed the bottle. She held it up and looked at it. Pete could see the coffee stains on the label.

“Tablets!” Jolene exclaimed. “Yes!”

“They are for pain relief,” Pete explained.

“Great! My head hurts.” Jolene pocketed the bottle.

“Hey, those are mine!” said Pete, puzzled.

“Not anymore.” She winked at him. “—But like I told you, I’m gonna pay you back including these tablets—really. Can you quickly give me the money now?”

Pete opened his wallet and looked inside. “I can only lend you twelve dollars.”

“Better than nothing.” Jolene sighed as she grabbed the money. Barefoot, she toddled to the door. There she waved to him again. “Thanks, babe!”

Pete was confused. Jolene had sneaked into the room supposedly looking for money. She had accused Pete of stealing, but then borrowed money from him and took his tablets—with an expression on her face as if Santa had belatedly granted her a great wish.

Looking back, Pete realized how strange the last few minutes had been. He thought hard. Above all, the thing with the tablets puzzled him. Why had Jolene helped herself to them? There were plenty of such tablets here in the house.

Pete's legs itched, his wrist hurt, his head too. It wasn't going to work out like that. He felt as if he had the solution right in front of him, but every time he wanted to look closely, something distracted him.

Nevertheless, Pete tried to recall what had happened since this morning. He had taken a tablet in his room and put the bottle in his pocket. Then he had run down the stairs and clashed with Clementine and Jolene in the hallway. He must have lost the bottle in the process... but hold on... Was there something wrong?

Pete's head was spinning. With Bootsie in the garage, he had nervously fumbled for his business cards. Suddenly, he recalled that the tablet bottle had been in his pocket at that time! That meant that it hadn't fallen out of his pocket during the hallway collision! So what had Jupe picked up after that? Perhaps a similar bottle of tablets belonging to someone else? Could it have been Jolene's?

The Second Investigator started pacing back and forth. He was now pretty sure that before he got knocked out in the garage, he had his tablet bottle in his pocket... but after he recovered from the blow, the bottle was gone—likely to have been taken by the person who knocked him out. Now it had happened again—only not with a blow to the head, but quite brazenly and directly.

Suddenly it dawned on Pete that Jolene wasn't looking for money. That had just been a ridiculous pretext. She was after the tablets for sure!

The Second Investigator ran to the door and rushed into the corridor. Where had Jolene gone? He sped down the creaking stairs.

At the ground floor, Pete took a quick glance through the door to the courtyard. Mr Greene was still there reading. Pete paid him no further attention. He ran to the front door and yanked it open. There was nobody on the street. Jolene could never have left the guest house and reached her house so quickly—at least not without audible footsteps on the stairs. Nobody could run on those old, creaky steps without making a noise. He turned back, went to the courtyard and approached Mr Greene. "Excuse me, did a young woman just pass by here?"

Mr Greene looked up. "No, I haven't seen anyone."

Pete quickly thanked him. Jolene was definitely still in the guest house. Perhaps she had locked herself in the upstairs bathroom or in one of the other rooms. Perhaps she was hiding there with the stolen tablets, pursuing another devious plan. The Second Investigator decided to investigate and so he crept back up the stairs.

On the first floor, there were four rooms, a bathroom and a toilet. Pete paused at the top of the stairs and listened. The bathroom and toilet were normally unlocked. Jolene would have needed a key for the other rooms. How likely was it that she had the other room keys in addition to that for Room 101?

Something rustled in the bathroom. The door was only half ajar. Pete opened it carefully. The rustling sounded again. The window was opened a gap. A yellow shower curtain with the black mould stains puffed out.

The Second Investigator entered the bathroom. He saw himself in the mirror above the washbasin. It was an unusually pale Pete Crenshaw with dark circles under his eyes. A crack in the glass ran right through his face, adding to the eerie effect.

Pete walked past the washbasin until he was standing in front of the bathtub. With his unscathed hand, he grabbed the shower curtain and pulled it aside with a flourish.

14. Jupiter Meets Mercury

There was no one in the bathtub. A few drops of water came off the shower head and fell to the tub.

Pete turned on his heel. Without hesitation, he rushed out of the bathroom and pulled open the next door—which was the toilet. The window in the tiny toilet was also opened a gap. There was a discreet smell of cigarette smoke and strawberries. Clearly, Jolene had been in here. That was her smell—smoke and that cheap perfume that smelled like chewing gum. So she had left Room 101 and had entered here.

More importantly, where was Jolene now? Had she returned to Room 101? Pete had not locked the door. He tiptoed over and peered into his room. No one was there. He bent down. There were thick grey flakes of dust under the bed, but there was no sign of her.

On the first floor, the other rooms were 102, 103 and one marked ‘Private’. Pete carefully pushed down the handle of Room 102. This was the room of Mr Greene, the gentleman in the tweed suit. Surprised, Pete noticed that the door was not locked. From where he was standing, he couldn’t see anyone in the room. Lay folded on a small table was a black leather suitcase. The bed was neatly made. A paperback book lay on the bedside table. Next to it was a small plastic tablet bottle... with an orange cap!

Pretty much everyone in Carmine Falls seemed to be looking for something—people in caves, main water taps, keys, and lost chalices. Instead, the tablets that Clementine sold cheaply were popping up everywhere.

Pete stepped closer. He wanted to reach for the tablet bottle, but hesitated. The room smelled of an expensive aftershave. It was a classic men’s fragrance with a fougère aroma.

Now that Pete was standing in front of the bed, he noticed another smell... or was he just imagining it? Did he smell strawberries? He bent down to look under the bed.

No sooner had he got down on his knees than he heard a noise. This time Pete reacted immediately. He threw himself on his side. A thick hardcover book brushed against his shoulder. He turned around and grabbed the attacker. A sharp pain ran through his body. He had used his injured hand! However, letting go was out of the question—quite the opposite. The pain only made him angrier.

With a single blow, he knocked Jolene down and threw himself on top of her. There was a huge thud as they landed on the carpet. The hardcover book hit the floor next to them.

“What are you doing?” Jolene groaned as Pete pinned her down. “Do you always attack defenceless people?”

“I could ask you the same thing!” Pete said as he eased up a little because his guilty conscience was calling. “You tried to knock me down first.”

“—Because you broke in here!”

“Yeah right! So now I’m the burglar!” sneered Pete. “Why don’t you admit that you’ve been hiding in here!”

Jolene fidgeted. “Let go of me!”

“Not until you tell me what’s playing here!”

“Nothing is played here.”

“Oh yes, something is!” growled Pete. “Let me guess—the story about the money was a lie! You’re looking for some medication, and you were probably about to steal that tablet bottle there on the bedside table when I interrupted you.”

“Yeah, sure.” Jolene sighed. “I need some of that stuff Clementine sells, but she won’t give me any more. I need something to put me in a good mood.”

“Good mood?” Pete remarked. “These are not psychotropic drugs!”

“So what?” Jolene scowled at him. “Now get off me.”

Pete shook his head. “We haven’t sorted this out yet!”

“Yes, we did.” Jolene rolled her eyes. “I don’t take personal things from others. Those are just pain relief tablets anyway.”

“What about my tablets?”

“I’ll give them back later!” promised Jolene. “I really have a headache! Now let go of me or I’ll call for help!”

“Then I’ll tell everybody that you are a tablet thief!” said Pete.

“I’m sure that posh old geezer down in the courtyard will believe you,” Jolene hissed with undisguised irony. “A youth who knocks down women in other people’s rooms while wearing a dog bandage is full of confidence... especially when his clothes are just an old musty shirt and pants.”

“Okay.” Pete let go of Jolene. “You don’t steal any more tablets and I won’t turn you in for it.”

She smiled. “Thank you! And not a word to Percy either, please!”

Pete hesitated. “You kind of have a problem with medication. Maybe—”

“We can talk about that later. I’m missing my favourite TV show.” She jumped up and ran to the door.

Pete grabbed his head. That had gone disastrously wrong. Jupiter would never have struck anyone, neither would Bob. His friends would certainly lecture him on how to behave as an investigator in such a situation.

Pete pressed his injured hand to his chest and sighed abysmally. Then he picked up the hardcover book and put it on the bedside table. Since the book was large, he had to push the tablet bottle aside... when he suddenly startled!

What he saw set his thinking apparatus in high gear—there were coffee stains on the bottle’s label! He took the bottle in his hand and realized that... Jolene had lied yet again!

“We have to get out of here,” Jupiter whispered. Moose and Hank could very quickly climb up the slope and catch them. The boys didn’t want to risk a confrontation, especially when the men were armed after all.

Bob thought he saw movement between some trees. Ducking, he scrambled on until Jupiter stopped beside him. They had arrived at a crevice that led deep into the rock.

“In there!” Jupiter ordered and disappeared.

Bob did not hesitate for a second to follow his friend. With a pounding heart, he climbed into the darkness.

As it turned out, the crevice led directly into a narrow passageway. Arrows would have given the boys away, but without any markings at all, they would get mercilessly lost here. Bob quickly drew a question mark on the rock face with his green chalk.

The First Investigator turned around a sharp bend and stopped abruptly. Bob, who had not been prepared for this, bumped into him. The cone of his flashlight grazed long black hair

and reflected in a pair of eyes. Bob almost cried out. Someone jumped towards them, at the same time, a knife flashed.

“Wait!” Jupiter threw up his hands defensively. “Perceval sent us!”

“Get back!” a harsh voice commanded. “Don’t come any closer!”

Cautiously, Bob raised the flashlight. The eerie creature turned out to be a young woman at second glance. Bob estimated her to be in her early twenties. Her hair hung shaggy in her pale face. A dark patch stretched across her right shoulder. In her left hand, she held a knife.

“We’re on your side, Mercury!” assured Jupiter as calmly as possible.

“Who are you?” she asked suspiciously.

“Jupiter Jones and Bob Andrews. I’m your cousin—your aunt Catherine’s son.”

The young woman did not lower the knife. Annoyed, she blinked into the light. “Put away your flashlight... and then tell me what this is all about!”

“You are wanted by a Mr Coldfield,” Jupiter explained. “We have to get out of here quickly. His men could come at any moment.”

“Why should I believe you?”

Bob was getting impatient. “Just look at Juve! The family resemblance is unmistakable!”

“Resemblance is not good enough,” Mercury said.

“You don’t have a choice right now! You have to trust us, otherwise Coldfield’s people will catch you.”

Mercury hesitated. She still held up the knife. “They won’t hurt me.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure!” said Bob forcefully. “Coldfield didn’t get the chalice and he’s annoyed.”

Mercury uttered a curse.

In the silence that followed, Bob listened. Had he heard something in the passageway behind him? “I really don’t want to meet those guys! They have guns.”

“Sure they do.” Mercury made a gruff motion with the knife. “They’re not to be trifled with. Neither am I!”

“Can we hide somewhere?” asked Jupiter.

“Everywhere,” she hissed. “The cave has a maze of tunnels. I’m going alone. Our paths part here and now! You go to the right, I’ll go to the left.”

“Someone’s coming!” Now Bob had clearly heard the sound of footsteps. It was coming swiftly closer.

Jupiter groaned. “All right, then. We’ll split up. Come on, Bob.”

Mercury climbed through a low crevice to the left and disappeared into the darkness. Jupiter headed for the passageway on the right. Bob hoped they would not get lost on the run. There was no time for more chalk question marks.

After only a few metres, the top of the passageway became lower and lower. The First Investigator slowed his pace. He was probably weighing up the risks. Was it more dangerous to climb into an unknown cave labyrinth or to face Coldfield’s people?

A muffled cry rang out... then another...

“Mercury!” Jupiter gasped.

Pete stared at the tablet bottle in his hand. The label was covered with coffee stains!

Now something became clear to Pete. Unless it was a huge coincidence, this was the bottle Jupiter had picked up in the hallway because he had mistaken it for Pete’s. This was the same bottle that Jolene had just taken from him in Room 101 and then put on the bedside table in Room 102.

The Second Investigator pocketed the bottle, ran down the stairs and hurried out of the guest house. Jolene was about to cross the street but Pete grabbed her by the arm.

"We should talk about this!" He held the bottle out to her.

Her eyes widened. "What are you doing with that?"

"This was in Mr Greene's room."

"Then it is his," Jolene insisted. "So please put it back."

"This is not his, and you know it. You put it on his bedside table. Why? I want to know the truth!" said Pete coolly. "Is this about drugs?"

"Nonsense!" she hissed. "Give me the bottle. I'll take it back to the guest house."

"No!"

"Oh yes!" Jolene made a lightning-fast movement to break free.

The young woman succeeded, but she stumbled and took a step backwards to avoid falling. In doing so, she stepped right onto the edge of the pavement. At the same time, a car approached. Jolene rowed her arms, brakes squealed, and Pete tried to save her from falling.

With a metallic 'bang', the young woman landed on the very edge of the bonnet. There she lay motionless.

"No! No!" The driver jumped out of the car. Pete recognized the woman. She was Mrs Dever, the one with the rustling basket at the vet's clinic. She immediately leaned over Jolene. "Oh no! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!"

Jolene was conscious. She cursed, which upset Mrs Dever even more.

"Well, I was driving slow, thank goodness... I mean, I must have been driving slowly, so I was still able to brake in time... Really I did brake..." She looked at Pete for help.

They both bent over Jolene. "Looks like she's okay," Pete said. "At most, she'll have a few bruises."

"No!" The excited Mrs Dever shook her head in exasperation. "She has to get to a clinic, but I can't drive after that fright! I don't know if I'll ever be able to get into a car again!"

"I don't want to go to the clinic!" growled Jolene. "I just need my pain relief tablets. This guy here stole them from me!"

Mrs Dever eyed Pete. Only now did she notice his strange outfit. "Is that right?"

"It's a long story—a very long story," said the Second Investigator. "How about I drive you and Jolene to Dr Craddock. Then we can call the sheriff from there."

"No sheriff!" hissed Jolene.

The woman backed away nervously. "She's had a shock! I'm sure Dr Craddock can help."

"Hey, I'm not a bloody cat!" protested Jolene.

However, Pete was already opening the right rear door of the car.

"It's better this way." The Second Investigator thought to himself. With Dr. Craddock, Jolene couldn't escape so easily and Pete could buy some time at the vet's until Jupe and Bob returned.

15. Mercury's Story

Bob stood crouched in the cave passageway. A man's voice sounded. He listened intently.

"I hear a scuffle!" whispered Bob.

"We have to prevent the worst from happening!" decided Jupiter.

"Too risky," Bob replied, but he knew Jupiter was right. The First Investigator was already pushing past him, which was only just possible in the narrow passageway.

As he walked, Jupiter took off his backpack and rummaged around in it. He had the flashlight tucked into the crook of his arm.

"Mercury?" he called out.

There was another outcry.

"Mercury!" yelled Jupiter as he ran back down the passageway. Hastily he stuffed his valuables into his trouser pockets. "Where are you? I've been waiting here all this time with this stupid cup!"

Silence.

Once again, Jupiter's acting talent showed. He played his role so convincingly that Bob could only marvel.

"Now come on! I don't have forever! Man, I'm about to throw this thing in the nearest hole!" Jupiter did something with his backpack that Bob couldn't quite make out.

"Stop!" A beam of light grazed the two investigators. Out of the darkness, a man came straight at them. It was one of Coldfield's thugs—the smaller one. He should be Hank, the one assigned to search inside the cave. "Give me the chalice, boy!"

"What? Who are you? No! No way!" Jupiter shouted with feigned indignation.

"Give me that!" With that, Hank rudely snatched the backpack from Jupiter's hands.

"What are you going to do?" Jupiter said, now in a slightly trembling voice.

"Is the chalice in here?" Hank growled. Before Jupiter could answer, Hank unfastened the zip.

The First Investigator ducked and pushed Bob backwards. A bang sounded and a grey-blue cloud obscured the view. The man rubbed his watery eyes groggily.

"Run!" Jupiter urged his friend.

He did not need to say that twice. Hank shouted wild imprecations after them.

Only now did Bob realize what he had seen. It was the new anti-theft device that Jupiter had built into his backpack! However, Bob had no time to marvel at his friend's invention. They had to quickly find their way through the dark maze—this time in the direction Mercury had taken. It wasn't long before they caught up with Jupiter's cousin. She dragged herself forward with difficulty.

"We have to get out!" For once, Jupiter didn't dwell on long explanations. "Our car is at the bottom of the slope. How do we get there?"

The young woman gasped. "There is an exit on the eastern slope—behind a bush. Follow me."

Without another word, Mercury led the boys through the maze. Again and again, they had to climb over piles of stones or squeeze through narrow crevices. In some places the

ceiling was barely a metre high. Finally greenish daylight shone through a bramble bush towards them. They had reached the exit!

Jupiter pushed the bush aside. "I see the car!"

"What about Coldfield's other thug?" asked Bob. "—The one searching outside?"

"I don't see him..." Jupe replied. "Anyway, let's get going. There are lots of thorns ahead, and we have to go through it."

The car was so close, but the undergrowth did its best to stop the three. Jupiter, who led the way, got the most scratches. Mercury came next, and she did not escape getting bloody welts either. Bob was so tense that he hardly felt the pain. Again and again, he looked around. Coldfield's second thug could spot them at any moment... and indeed, they had almost reached the car when the giant Moose appeared on the road—not a hundred metres away from them.

It was lucky that Bob had not locked the car. The three of them yanked the doors open. At the same time, Moose started to sprint. Bob's fingers were trembling. The ignition key slipped out of his hand and fell onto the foot well.

"The guy's almost here!" groaned Mercury in the back seat.

"Lock all the doors!" Jupiter shouted as Bob bent down to the foot well in search of the key. Mercury cursed.

"Got it!" Bob put the key in the ignition and started the car.

The next moment, Moose had reached the MG. He pulled at the driver's door handle in vain. Then he slammed his fist against the window.

"Step on it!" Mercury yelled.

Bob jammed on the accelerator and the MG sped ahead. A few low-hanging branches whipped onto the windscreen. Bob didn't know where the road led, but it didn't matter right now. Shortly afterwards, the wooded hills were behind them and the landscape became flatter and more spacious.

"That was close!" Bob gasped.

"Darn!" Mercury gasped as she pressed her hand on her wounded shoulder.

"Now I'd like to know what the Chalice of Destiny is all about," Jupiter turned to his cousin.

"It's a very long story."

"Then give us the short version, otherwise we can't help."

"Landslide... mud everywhere... even at the villas... fence broken... alarm system failed... burglary... Chalice of Destiny... angry owner—unfortunately with a ritual dagger!" Mercury enumerated in telegram style. "Make of it what you will."

"I will try," Jupiter replied. "You work as a hired thief for Coldfield. You stole the chalice for him. In the process, you were attacked and stabbed in the shoulder, yet you managed to escape."

"The landslide in question was on the coast—near Colitas Canyon... hence the traces of wet clay we found. You dragged yourself to the train station and kept the chalice in a locker there. After that, you escaped to a place where Leland could pick you up."

"During the car ride, you bled all over the back seat. Maybe Leland originally wanted to hide you in the Abernathys' house, but Bootsie was on his observation duties. It was too risky to be there under the watchful eyes of the old man. That's why Leland went with you to the cave."

"That's about right," Mercury growled.

"What a ridiculous idea!" said Bob.

"It was anything but ridiculous," Mercury countered.

"I mean, why did you want to hide in a cave of all places?" Bob asked.

"You know how small this town is? There is really no place to hide, especially when I am injured. I know that cave like the back of my hand. Besides, I had to buy time before I get to some place else."

"Why can't you go immediately?" Jupe asked.

"I'm going away with my father but he has something urgent to settle first," Mercury explained.

"I suppose that you need to hide because the owner of the chalice caught you breaking in and stealing the thing."

"That's right," said Mercury wanly. "The man's name is Oswald Carver and he's far more dangerous than Coldfield. He will stop at nothing for his art collection. Even his own people are afraid of him! I was lucky to escape."

"—But you are badly injured," Jupe said. "You need to go to a clinic!"

"My father will take care of me," Mercury said dismissively. "He was a paramedic and he's dealt with far worse injuries."

"Where did he used to work?"

"—In the military," Mercury replied. "In the end, he couldn't take the job anymore. That's why he left." Mercury crossed her arms. "Now I want to know what you're involved in and why my boss showed up at the cave."

"We got involved by chance when we were visiting Uncle Perceval," Jupiter said tersely. "We overheard several conversations, including that between Leland and Coldfield outside the cave entrance. It points to an unsuccessful handover of the chalice due to the key not matching the locker."

"The key didn't match?" Mercury asked in surprise. "Is my father all right?"

Bob nodded hesitantly. "Yes, when we last saw him."

"I wonder who changed the key," Jupiter said as Bob steered the car between two cornfields. "One of the people involved must be playing a false game."

"It can't be!" Mercury affirmed. "After I got injured and went into hiding, I devised a plan to get the chalice to Mr Coldfield. I gave my father the key. However, I took the tag with the locker number off the key and also didn't tell him the locker location. Instead, I gave this information to my uncle Percy. I wanted to have them both involved as I was hoping that they would reconcile their differences by working together." She closed her eyes.

"I guess that didn't work out," Bob said.

"Coldfield would have had the chalice by now," Mercury continued. "Without a rogue art dealer like him, the thing is unsellable. You just can't peddle that thing for what it's worth in a flea market."

"Coldfield thought that you still have the chalice," Jupe deduced, "so he followed Leland to get to you."

"I was hiding from Carver and now I'm running from Coldfield." Mercury continued and shook her head in disbelief. "The coup was supposed to be my way out. Looks like I'm in deeper trouble now than ever!"

"What's going to happen to your father?" asked Jupiter when Bob drove the MG back on the country road to Carmine Falls after a long diversion.

Mercury hesitated and then said: "At the moment, I'm afraid Coldfield will hold on to my father. In that way, he can use it as leverage against me."

"—Except you don't have the chalice," Jupiter added.

"Everything went wrong with this thing right from the start," Mercury cursed. "I no longer want to work for Coldfield, I finally wanted to study. It wasn't an easy road, and now

this stupid chalice is getting in the way.”

“There really is destiny,” Bob said thoughtfully.

“I don’t believe in destiny,” Mercury said firmly. “I believe in coincidences. All events have a statistical probability. Consequently, anything that has a probability higher than zero per cent can happen.”

“That almost corresponds with my thinking,” said Jupiter, “if you disregard the fact that events can also occur with a probability of zero per cent. In the case of an infinite probability distribution—”

“Sheesh... no wonder you two are cousins...” Bob interjected. “I hate to interrupt your gobbledygook, but we need a plan!”

Jupiter nodded. “Get the chalice, free Leland, inform the police and make sure Coldfield is put behind bars.”

“—But Oswald Carver will still be after me,” Mercury countered. “His collection is sacred to him and he will do anything to get the chalice back. Apart from that, I can’t go to the police. How am I supposed to explain to them what part I play in all this?”

“You stole the chalice. There’s no denying that, but we won’t hand you over to Carver or Coldfield,” Jupiter promised... but he said nothing about the police.

“Are you going to see my uncle?” asked Mercury with a nervous look at the road. “I can’t let anyone see me. Besides, Coldfield might already be waiting for me there!”

“You just let me worry about that.” Jupiter said as Bob steered the car onto a sandy path behind the guest house and parked there. Coldfield would not see the car here if he indeed went to Perceval’s house.

The three of them climbed over the fence into the yard of Carmine Inn. The back door was open and Clementine’s voice drifted into the open. “What a pity you are leaving already. Have a good trip then, Mr Greene.”

“Yes, thank you,” the man replied curtly.

Jupiter peered through the window into the hallway. The fine elderly gentleman in the tweed suit grabbed his black leather suitcase and was about to leave.

However, Clementine held her guest by the arm. “When I came back from shopping just now, there was a book in the courtyard. Is it yours?”

Mercury and the boys were staring at the book lying on a small wicker table next to a sun chair. Jupe looked around quickly. Neither Clementine nor Mr Greene posed a threat to Mercury. However, their appearance would raise unnecessary questions, not to mention the fact that all three were dirty and sweaty.

“Oh, yeah... I forgot all about that.” The man replied. “Thank you. I’ll get the book and then I’ll leave.”

Jupiter pulled Mercury by the arm to a long table that was still there from the party. Several tablecloths were thrown over it. At the last moment, Bob also managed to slip into the hiding place.

Footsteps came closer. Jupiter couldn’t see what was happening from where he was hiding, but Mercury peered through the gap between two tablecloths. Her expression changed within seconds.

Jupiter would have loved to see what had frightened his cousin so. Judging by the footsteps, Mr Greene had come into the courtyard alone, taken his book and now turned back. Mercury closed her eyes. She breathed in deeply and out again.

“You have it. Wonderful,” Clementine’s voice was heard. “Come and see us again soon!”

“I will,” Mr Greene replied. The heavy front door slammed shut and Clementine’s mules clattered across the tiled hallway towards the kitchen. Then there was silence in the house.

“What’s wrong?” whispered Jupiter.

“That was him!” Mercury slowly turned her head towards her cousin.

“Who?”

“Oswald Carver!” she said, barely audible.

“The owner of the chalice? The man who attacked you?” Jupiter was completely perplexed.

Mercury nodded.

“So he traced you here!”

“—But Mr Greene... I mean, Mr Carver didn’t know about the hiding place in the cave,” Bob now interjected quietly. “—Otherwise he would have been there long ago.”

“And why is he leaving now?” asked Mercury, confused.

“Maybe he has the chalice!” Bob suggested.

Jupiter pulled out his mobile phone. “I’ll send a message to Pete to tell him to meet us upstairs in our room... and Perceval has to come too!”

16. Where is the Key?

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door of Room 101. Jupiter opened it. “Uncle Perceval. Do come in.”

Perceval Abernathy took a step forward indecisively. “What’s so important?”

“The Chalice of Destiny,” Mercury said softly but clearly. She was lying on the left side of the large double bed.

Perceval stared at his niece in horror. “What are you doing here?”

“Carver was here and Coldfield has my father,” she said tersely.

“Coldfield will do whatever it takes to get you if you don’t deliver the chalice to him!” Perceval told her.

“I’m sure he would,” Mercury responded reproachfully.

Perceval took a few awkward steps to the side and then dropped into a chair.

“How could you two mess up the handover?” Mercury blurted out.

“We went to Colitas Station and looked for Locker Number 13, like you told me,” Perceval explained, “but the key didn’t match.”

“That can’t be!” Mercury exclaimed. “I only have that one key, and I gave it to my father.”

“Anyway, the plan failed,” Perceval concluded.

“What was the plan then?” asked Bob.

“We were supposed to put the chalice in a burlap bag before placing it on a bench at the station,” Perceval explained. “After Coldfield gets the chalice, we will get the money. It will be in an envelope which will be put in a bin next to the same bench.

“It was clear that his men were watching us at the lockers. When we didn’t get the chalice, we tried to sneak off and drive away, but one of his guys stopped us. We narrowly escaped from him after that.”

“—But not for long,” Bob added. “The men followed you together with their boss—in the black van.”

“Had the handover been successful, we were to go to the cave immediately to get you, Mercury,” Perceval continued, “but as it turned out, we came back to the house as I wanted to search for the correct key. We had an argument and Lee decided to go to the cave by himself to get you anyway.”

“So the black van followed him, and Coldfield confronted him outside the cave. Jupe and I were there when Coldfield sent his two goons to search the cave,” Bob added.

Mercury kneaded thoughtfully at her earlobe. “Do you know where my father kept the key?”

“He told me that it was in a drawer in his room,” Perceval said.

“Now I do believe that someone changed the key...” Mercury surmised. “You can easily get an identical key blank and mess up the cuts on the blade.”

Bob turned to Perceval. “When you and Leland were out of the house, someone could have entered Leland’s room and changed the key.”

“It’s possible... but the more I think about it, the more I can’t rule out that Lee set me up!” Perceval groaned.

"He didn't set you up," Mercury countered. "This mistrust has got to come to an end. You two used to be best friends!"

"Hmm..." Bob murmured. "What about Jolene? She could have changed the key!"

"She would never do that!" said Perceval indignantly.

"Oh yes, she would," Mercury argued. "It was probably easy for her. Did you discuss the key and the locker location with my father while in your house... in her presence?"

"Uh... yeah, I think so..." Perceval replied sheepishly, "in Lee's room."

"—Then she could have overheard you two," Mercury surmised. "Now I'm pretty sure she knows about the key and the locker."

"—But what motive does Jolene have to change the key?" Bob asked.

Mercury turned to the boys and said: "You should know that she had a very similar job to mine."

Perceval waved it off. "I don't want to hear about it! You know Jo wanted to start a new life and I'm giving her that chance."

"Listen to me, please!" Mercury said firmly to her uncle. "Your wife worked for Oswald Carver!"

Perceval stared at his niece in disbelief. "Never!"

"She is neither naïve nor untalented. She's just pretending. Until two years ago, she was Carver's best treasure hunter."

"Really?" Bob remarked in amazement. "Now that's a big coincidence."

"It's not," Mercury said. "Jolene and I met on a job—as competitors. She was supposed to get hold of a valuable sword for Carver, but I tricked her. My boss, Coldfield, got the sword. Jolene got nothing. Carver was furious. He then gave her one last chance, but she was so afraid of Carver's wrath that she blew the job. I don't know the details, but he must have threatened her pretty badly."

"She went into hiding and asked me, of all people, for help. Being a loner, she had no one to turn to—no family, no friends, no partner. Since I was in a way to blame for her situation, I promised to keep her safe. So I got her a room here at this very guest house."

"—Because Carver wouldn't look for Jolene in a sleepy place like this?" Bob added.

"Exactly," Mercury affirmed. "I never dreamed that my uncle here could start a relationship with her and eventually even marry her, but Jolene wrapped him around her little finger from day one. Conveniently, she took on a new surname along with free accommodation to hole up in."

"It makes sense." Jupiter nodded slowly. "I suppose you knew about the treasures in Carver's house through Jolene?"

"Right. She told me about all the wealth she has to give up by being here."

"Is it possible that Jolene is now working for Carver again?" asked Bob.

Perceval shook his head vigorously. "No, why should she do that? She has it good here after all!"

"Really?" Mercury laughed. "With Carver, Jolene wallowed in luxury. He was like a rich father to her. She had a sports car, got to live in his mansion, swim in the pool, accompany him to parties, and wear jewellery that she snatched for him. In Carmine Falls, she sits on an old couch in front of the TV all day. That's pure under-achievement for her, isn't it? If there is one thing she would enjoy now, it would be by being her lackadaisical self."

At that moment, a ring sounded in Perceval's trouser pocket. He winced, then pulled out an ancient mobile phone. "Unknown number. Should I answer it?"

"Of course!" Bob and Mercury said at the same time.

Jupiter's uncle held the device to his ear and listened. While someone was talking on the other end, his expression darkened. He only mumbled an occasional "yeah", before finally hanging up.

"Well?"

"That was your boss, Coldfield. He wants the chalice or we won't see Lee alive again."

"—But we don't have the key!" cried Mercury angrily.

"We have until tonight to find it," Perceval said quietly. "The drop-off is at eight o'clock in an old warehouse in Salinas."

Just then, the door opened. Everyone turned around.

It was Pete who stepped into the room. He led Jolene in by the arm... though 'led' wasn't quite the right word. Actually, he pulled and dragged her into the room. Jolene's leg was wrapped in a bandage with a paw pattern.

"Jo! What happened to you?" asked Perceval in a trembling voice.

"Jolene was hit by a car," Pete explained as he grabbed a chair for Jolene to sit on. "It's not too bad. We've already been to the vet. The slight bruises will heal soon."

Perceval looked like he was about to faint; Bob raised his eyebrows questioningly; Mercury looked at her aunt scrutinizingly; Jolene stared around with a venomous look; and Pete looked at Mercury.

Jupiter seemed to be analysing everyone's reaction. Eventually, he cleared his throat. "Jolene is clearly not here voluntarily. In any case, I think it is now appropriate for us to brief each other so that we can get an idea of the overall picture and latest developments."

It wasn't easy as everyone wanted to speak at the same time. Eventually, everyone had to take turns to tell their story. Only Jolene said nothing.

When Juve came to the part with Oswald Carver in the courtyard, Pete looked at Jolene scrutinizingly. Then he held up his hand to interrupt the First Investigator. "Let me get this straight—you're all looking for a key and the nice Mr Greene is really the evil Mr Carver, the owner of the chalice?"

"That's right!" Bob nodded.

"Pete, what are you getting at?" Jupiter asked.

The Second Investigator did not answer. Instead, he reached into his trouser pocket and took out the tablet bottle—Jolene's tablet bottle—the one with the coffee stains on the label. Then he unscrewed the orange cap and turned the bottle over. A few white tablets fell onto his outstretched palm... followed by a small silver object. "Tadaa!"

Mercury sat up with a jerk. "The key!"

"Jo! So you took it..." Perceval gasped, obviously disappointed.

"No, it was the boy!" growled Jolene. "He and his buddies are behind everything."

"She's lying!" Pete defended himself. "You can look at her mobile phone. Earlier at the vet's clinic, she sent a message before I could stop her."

"She warned Carver, didn't she?" concluded Mercury.

"Right on!" Pete's face was flushed with excitement. "I caught a glimpse of the message. It was something like: 'Urgent! Leave now. Call you later.'"

"That's why Mr Carver, known to us as Mr Greene, left so spontaneously," Bob added. "Jolene alerted her boss!"

"So everything makes sense now," Jupiter said. "Jolene prevented the chalice from being handed over at the train station by stealing the key in Leland's room and replacing it with a fake. She hid the real one in a tablet bottle to give to Carver at the guest house. However, there was the momentous collision with Pete and Clementine in the hallway. Jolene was so focussed on the coffee stains on her sandals that she didn't realize that she had lost her tablet

bottle—presumably it dropped out of her pocket. I happened to see the bottle and picked it up, thinking that it was Pete’s.

“Only later when Jolene couldn’t find her bottle, she recalled Pete mentioning his pain relief tablets while on the verandah. She then suspected that after the collision, Pete had mistakenly pocketed her bottle. It was a misunderstanding that led to one desperate act after another. Jolene knocked out Pete in the garage and searched his trouser pockets. She took Pete’s tablet bottle—which only had tablets in it.”

“That’s why the water tap broke!” Bob took over. “She staged that to get at our clothes and search it, but again, she didn’t find anything because Jupe, who had her tablet bottle at that time, had already taken it out of his wet pants and given it back to Pete. Jolene must have been very afraid of failing as Carver—as the mild-mannered Mr Greene—was waiting for the key.”

Pete then took over: “She then searched our room, and took her tablet bottle back from me, after telling me a bunch of lies. She then placed the bottle in Room 102 for Mr Carver. Luckily I saw it and snatched it back!”

“Oh, shut up!” Jolene finally snapped.

Jupiter ignored his ill-tempered aunt and pinched lower lip thoughtfully. “So far, no handover has taken place and, strictly speaking, Carver has committed no crime. The chalice had been in his possession, even if in all likelihood he did not obtain it through legal sources.”

“We have to help my father,” Mercury said firmly. “That’s the most important thing now!”

“There is a way we could solve several problems at once,” Jupiter explained. “We can contact Coldfield, and we can get Carver’s number from Jolene’s mobile phone.”

Mercury nodded and asked: “What do you suggest?”

17. Showdown at the Salvage Yard

“Mr Coldfield?” Jupiter held Perceval’s mobile phone to his ear. “I’m Jack Abernathy. I can’t talk for long. This phone belongs to my uncle Percy and he may be back at any moment.”

“What do you want?” the male voice at the other end asked gruffly.

Jupiter once again relied on his acting talent. He had to sound confident and naïve at the same time. That was not easy.

“I have this fancy cup you want. My uncle didn’t realize that I stole his locker key. Now I have this ugly thing with me.”

“What do you want for it?” asked Coldfield. His voice was difficult to interpret.

“I want a thousand dollars!” demanded Jupiter. “—And I want cash—in small notes. You can pick up this cup tonight at 9 pm, but not in Carmine Falls, otherwise my uncle will interfere. Go to Rocky Beach. I’ve got my own personal stash there—safe, secure and totally undisturbed. Perfect for the deal.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes,” Jupiter mumbled. “Uh, wait... Bring Leland Hanson with you. A buddy of mine has a score to settle with him. Is that okay so far?”

Coldfield hesitated. “Why should I believe you?”

“It’s up to you,” Jupiter said, annoyed. “I don’t want this stupid cup, but I want the money—one thousand dollars and not a cent less! If you don’t come tonight, I’ll just sell it to someone else.”

“I’ll be there! You better not play any tricks...” said Coldfield, for whom the thousand dollars must have been a real bargain.

Jupiter explained to Coldfield how to get to a specific location where someone would be there waiting for him. Then he hung up.

There was still a lot to do. Next he would call Oswald Carver and then drive to the train station in Colitas Canyon. There he would pick up a decidedly valuable item.

The Jones Salvage Yard lay quiet in the darkness. Jupiter was waiting in the outdoor workshop, sitting on an old camping chair. On the work bench in front of him was a big old suitcase.

It felt good to be home again. Aunt Mathilda’s dinner alone had been a treat. Now his uncle and aunt were sitting in front of the television in the Jones family home, which was situated next to the salvage yard.

However, they were not alone. Jolene Abernathy had to watch TV with them whether she wanted to or not. Jupiter had decided that no one could handle an ill-tempered Aunt Jolene better than a resolute Aunt Mathilda. Should Jolene attempt to escape despite her bonds of crochet wool, she would regret it. She would have to face the wrath of Mathilda Jones.

Meanwhile, The Three Investigators were ready for the showdown between Mr Carver and Mr Coldfield. For the plan to work, it was crucial for the two parties not to meet before the showdown, so Jupiter had directed them to different entrances to the salvage yard. For this, Pete was stationed at the front gate of the salvage yard to welcome Mr Carver.

Bob, on the other hand, was outside the back fence by the road to meet Mr Coldfield. However, the salvage yard did not have a back entrance—not officially, though, because hardly anyone knew that there was a hidden opening there. The Three Investigators usually kept their secrets very well. Only in special cases did they make exceptions. Tonight was such a case.

The outside of the wooden back fence was painted a dramatic scene of the San Francisco fire of 1906. It depicted burning buildings, horse-drawn fire engines dashing into action, and people frantically fleeing. There was a part on the painting which showed a little dog looking sadly at the fire. The Three Investigators named the dog Rover. One of his eyes was a knot in the wood, which when picked out, one could reach in to undo a catch. Then several boards would swing up to reveal an opening. This secret entrance was known as ‘Red Gate Rover’. Specially for this case, Bob had already swung up the boards to prepare for the guests.

The First Investigator was satisfied. Both men underestimated him. They thought Jupiter was a juvenile thief who wanted to make a quick buck. That was an advantage, but still, a lot could go wrong.

... And it did.

Carver arrived ten minutes early. He didn’t keep to the arrangements—or his watch was wrong. Pete led Carver to the outdoor workshop. Jupiter had planned for the fact that the man might have a weapon with him. However, if The Three Investigators did anything now, they would jeopardize the hostage release. Nothing could be allowed to happen until Coldfield arrived with Leland.

Of course, Jupiter had also thought of stalling tactics, but Carver didn’t look like he was going to be much of a talker. Even though he was still wearing his green tweed suit, he had completely dropped the friendly façade of the nice old Mr Greene. Instead, his expression was icy cold. His eyes were narrowed to slits and his right hand was raised, holding a gun.

A shiver ran down Jupiter’s spine. Carver pointed the gun directly at the First Investigator. He paid no attention to Pete, who was now standing behind Jupe.

“Where is the chalice?”

“Do you have the money?” asked Jupiter.

“The chalice is mine. I’m not going to pay you thieves for it!”

“Yeah, right!” the First Investigator said with sarcasm. “Sure, the chalice had been in your possession... however, in the first place, you had obtained it illegally many years ago.”

“I am not a thief!” Carver countered coldly.

“—But you work with dealers of stolen goods... and maybe you even commissioned the thefts.”

“You better be careful with what you’re saying, boy! Very careful! So, where is the chalice?”

“Here in the suitcase,” Jupiter said. He tried hard to sound embarrassed. “The locker was stuffed full of ugly cups.”

“There were several chalices?” Carver sounded greedy. He was probably hoping to secure more works of art by the Russian goldsmith.

“Yeah... I don’t know much about these things,” Jupe said. “Maybe they were from older raids. Anyway, I took them all.”

“Show me!”

“Yeah, yeah, hold your horses...” said Jupiter. He flipped up the lid of the suitcase. Inside were five objects—one of them was worth several million dollars, the others only a few dollars each. Jupiter had searched the salvage yard for suitable pieces.

First, he took out a dented sports trophy and placed it on the dusty work bench. Next came an imitation Viking goblet made of ceramic... then a stoneware beer mug featuring a grumpy ogre with red lips and two horns.

"You know..." Jupiter continued his stalling tactics, "I really wonder what you see in these ugly things."

Carver leaned forward impatiently, the gun still at the ready. "This is worthless junk!"

"Wait!" Jupiter exclaimed. "I have more!"

"This better be good, boy," Carver snapped. "I didn't come all the way here to play your games."

Jupiter then took out a kitschy vase with little fairies, elves and unicorns embossed on it. Now there were four objects on the work bench.

At that moment, footsteps approached along the fence leading to the workshop. Bob appeared. Immediately behind him was Leland Hanson, followed by Hank with a raised gun. Bringing up the rear was Mr Coldfield, also holding his gun. He smoothed out his suit and looked around in amazement. "Oswald Carver! What a surprise!"

"What are you doing here?" the art collector hissed and pointed his gun at Coldfield. Coldfield in turn signalled to his henchman. Hank pushed Leland away from him and aimed his gun at Carver.

"I want the chalice," declared the rogue art dealer.

"It's mine," Carver said threateningly.

"We seem to have a serious conflict of interest here," Jupiter interjected. "By the way, would this be what you two are after?"

With that, Jupiter reached into the suitcase and took out the last object. It was the Chalice of Destiny. Everyone feasted their eyes on it...

The chalice was about 20 centimetres high, made of gold, and adorned with precious gems. The outer surface of it, including the knopped stem and circular base, was exquisitely decorated with motifs, symbols, and figures, created using a combination of engraving and filigree techniques. As Jupiter held it up, the gems sparkled promisingly in the dim light of the salvage yard illumination.

The First Investigator could drop the mask now and no longer had to play the silly boy.

"So it seems that I have only one chalice, but two contenders for it..." Jupiter said.

"Should the chalice go to Mr Carver? An art collector who acquired it illegally and attacked a thief with a ritual dagger?" He paused for a moment and turned his head to Coldfield. "—Or should it go to Mr Coldfield? An art dealer who engaged the same thief to steal it from Mr Carver?" Jupiter continued to look in Coldfield's direction. He also had his eyes on Leland.

"The chalice is mine!" demanded Carver.

"I think we should address the weapons issue first, otherwise we won't get out of this stalemate," Jupiter suggested.

"Shut up, boy!" Carver exclaimed. "You have no business here!"

"Sure I do, Mr Carver," Jupiter replied calmly and held up the chalice again. "I have this thing,"

Coldfield himself looked thoughtful. "What's your game?"

"Gentlemen..." Jupiter said as he placed the chalice back on the work bench. "Firstly, there is no need to use violence to settle this matter. The three of you hand in your weapons, then we negotiate... if not, I will have the final say on this stalemate."

The next moment, Jupe reached under the work bench, pulled out a large sledgehammer and raised it up in preparation to cause serious damage to the multi-million-dollar art object.

"You wouldn't dare!" Carver exclaimed.

“Why not?” Jupiter countered. “I’ve already told you that we don’t want this thing. So unless we get our money’s worth, or if any of you try anything funny, I will see to it that nobody gets a hold of this thing... intact.”

The two contenders hesitated.

“Gentlemen, I will make you a fair offer,” the First Investigator continued. “My two colleagues will take the weapons from the three of you at the same time... then nobody can trick each other. As soon as that’s done, we’ll get into the negotiations.”

The decision seemed to take half an eternity, but then Carver and Coldfield actually agreed to comply with Jupiter’s demands.

Pete walked to Carver, and Bob to Coldfield and Hank. With a nod to each other, the two investigators took the weapons off the men at the same time. That was the moment when Jupiter fervently hoped that no one would do anything stupid.

The First Investigator put down the sledgehammer and tried hard to smile superiorly. Although he was a good actor, he had to pull himself together to appear composed. His heart was beating so hard that he feared everyone could hear it. By then, Pete and Bob were already stepping back, with the weapons in their hands, muzzles pointed at the ground.

“Okay,” Pete said.

“Me too,” Bob confirmed.

“Good!” Jupiter said. “Then the negotiations can begin now.”

Suddenly, gleaming bright light flared up. There was movement around the piles of scrap metal. While five men in uniforms stormed the outdoor workshop, a familiar voice hollered through a megaphone: “This is the police! Put your hands up. We got you surrounded!”

The Three Investigators were honestly glad to see Inspector Cotta. As the police officers were apprehending the men, Jupiter looked around and noticed that someone was missing. It did not take him long to figure out what had happened. When the police officers stormed the workshop, in the commotion, Leland Hanson had sneaked away along the fence and had very likely left the salvage yard through Red Gate Rover!

As the three men were escorted out of the workshop, Cotta stepped up to The Three Investigators. Pete and Bob promptly handed to the inspector the three weapons they took from the men.

“Thank you for getting involved, sir!” Jupiter exclaimed.

“That was a risky action!” the inspector commented.

“At least one that was worthwhile.” Jupiter handed the Chalice of Destiny to the inspector. “Take good care of it. This stolen property is not only worth a few million dollars, it’s also supposed to be magical.”

“Well, I guess I’d better make sure it gets back to the rightful owners it was stolen from years ago,” Cotta promised.

“Good!” Jupiter smiled with satisfaction. “By the way, we have also held Mr Carver’s accomplice for you. You can take her away as well.”

Inspector Cotta raised an eyebrow. “—And you’re only now telling me this? Where is she?”

“She is in my house...” Jupiter explained, “under detention... by my aunt.”

“Are there any more criminals I should know about?” the inspector asked.

Jupiter hesitated. Along with Leland Hanson, there were Perceval and Mercury, both of whom remained in Carmine Falls.

For hours, the First Investigator had been pondering how to deal with them. It was a real battle he was fighting with himself. The arguments almost balanced each other out. As an investigator, he would want perpetrators caught and brought to justice. Mercury, however,

had tried to get out, and Perceval had wanted to help her. Of course, he had also hoped for a share of the loot...

There was no question that Mercury and Perceval were on the wrong side of the law. However, something in Jupiter resisted simply handing them over. He had to admit to himself that he liked Mercury and Perceval. What was more, they were his relatives... so he was biased.

Finally, Jupiter looked at Inspector Cotta. He would simply hand the case over to him and thus put the fate of Perceval, Leland, and Mercury in other hands. "You know, the case is quite complicated. We have focussed on catching the main players and securing the loot."

"Are you telling me that the police are supposed to do the rest for once?"

Jupiter nodded. "In your interrogation of Carver, Coldfield and their people, the connections should become clear."

Inspector Cotta looked at Jupiter thoughtfully. "Those are unusual words coming from you. I had expected a detailed lecture on the background of the case."

Jupiter grinned wearily. "Not this time, Inspector... Not this time..."

18. The Secrets About Jupiter's Family

The Abernathys' house was deserted. It was clear that Perceval, Leland and Mercury had hurriedly packed the most important things and left.

"Are you all right?" asked Uncle Titus after Jupiter had settled the bill at Carmine Inn and both of them were standing together on Sunset Drive.

"I don't know," Jupiter answered wearily. The arrest at the salvage yard was less than fifteen hours ago. He had hardly slept at all during the night and even in Pete's MG on the way to Carmine Falls, he had only dozed off briefly a couple of times. "There are still so many unanswered questions."

"Like what?" Uncle Titus asked.

Before Jupiter could answer, Pete and Bob came up to them, followed by Bootsie and his dog, Bella.

"You're Jupiter Jones, aren't you?" Bootsie asked in a creaky voice.

"That's me."

"—And you're the other uncle..." Bootsie eyed Uncle Titus. "—The one from Rocky Beach. I believe you're the one who set a detective on the Abernathys many years ago."

"How do you know that?" asked Titus in amazement.

"I caught the man at his work and chased him away."

"You sent a detective here, Uncle Titus?" asked Jupiter in surprise.

Uncle Titus visibly squirmed. "It's a long and complicated story."

"Your nephew should hear it," Bootsie interjected. "How about we have a chat over there on my verandah?"

Uncle Titus sighed heavily. "Very well, then, let's sit down together."

Together they went to the neighbour's house. Bella curled up on a blanket, while Uncle Titus and the boys took seats on wicker chairs that were already a few decades past their best.

Bootsie appeared shortly afterwards with a tray. "Bourbon, Mr Jones? And water for the boys?"

"Just as well," Uncle Titus replied. "I'm not driving today."

The old man then poured for himself and Uncle Titus from a bottle of amber liquid.

"Let's get down to business..." Bootsie sat down and looked piercingly at Uncle Titus. "You sent a detective here. After the death of Cathy and your brother Julius, you wanted to find out more about the family—and, of course, about the money Cathy owed you."

"That's right," Uncle Titus admitted and turned to Jupiter. "I never told you about it... as I do not have certainty."

"What did the detective find out?" Jupiter asked curtly.

Uncle Titus looked into his glass as if the answer was floating around there. "Leland, Perceval and Catherine were involved in some crooked things."

Jupiter gasped for breath, but Bootsie was already speaking up. "Not quite! You don't know the whole story and that dodgy detective definitely didn't talk to reliable witnesses here."

"Then please enlighten me," Uncle Titus requested impatiently.

“Well, one thing at a time,” Bootsie said thoughtfully. “I knew Cathy and her siblings when they were kids. They didn’t have it easy. Their mother led an erratic life and their father had started a new family in Chicago.

“So it was all the worse that they became friends with Leland Hanson, of all people. He was already causing trouble back then. He incited Percy to mischief and turned Carol’s head. Once while Leland and Carol were away from this place, they got married and later, Mercury was born. Leland was delighted to have a daughter, but he had had enough of small-town life—just like Percy. As far as I know, they joined a gang that ran illegal car races and gambling.”

“—And my mother was in on it?” asked Jupiter tonelessly.

Bootsie shook his head vehemently. “Cathy had already left Carmine Falls and made a new life for herself.”

“Is that so?” Uncle Titus remarked. “Then why did she borrow money from me? The detective confirmed to me that she gave the money to Perceval.”

“Percy was in big trouble,” Bootsie explained. “His gang had made a mess of some crooked deal and ended up making him a pawn. His life was in danger. Cathy raised a large sum for him. She was afraid, however, that Percy would mess up the drop.”

“—And she told all this to you of all people?” asked Uncle Titus, stunned.

“I was her godfather,” Bootsie said. “She had been at odds with her own mother for years. Her sister had died in the meantime and her brother was up to his neck in trouble. That’s why she came to me. She always valued my judgement.

“Together we hatched a plan. Cathy wanted to hand over the money and broker a deal that would allow Percy to get out of the gang. She therefore took the money back from him unnoticed and contacted the criminals. They demanded a handover at their headquarters in South America.” He sighed heavily. “Cathy agreed, but she never got there. The plane crashed and I guess the money went with it. I’ve blamed myself for years for not stopping her.”

“So she risked everything for her brother,” Uncle Titus said wanly. “That was very brave, but also risky. It cost her and my brother Julius their lives. It’s hard to forgive something like that.”

“If Cathy had set her mind on something, no one could stop her.” Bootsie sighed again. “In the end, the plane crash was probably just destiny.”

“—Or a bad coincidence,” Jupiter said quietly.

“So what happened then?” asked Bob after everyone had been silent for a while.

“Percy and Leland had no idea what had happened. Percy finally believed that Leland had stolen the money from him. Before I could tell him the truth, Leland had disappeared. Percy also had to hide again.

“At least luck was on his side for once—the gang was busted by the police. There were several simultaneous raids and arrests. In the end, all members of the gang were either dead or ended up in prison for life... and there was no evidence that Percy had ever been in contact with those people. No one threatened him anymore. No one made demands. Percy returned to his mother Angela a free man and lived with her and his niece Mercury.”

“That explains a lot,” Jupiter said and turned to his uncle. “—But why was I never allowed to meet my grandmother? She had nothing to do with it!”

“You had lost your parents then.” Uncle Titus stared at the floor. “It was all difficult enough. I didn’t want you to have to deal with all the Abernathys’ problems too...” Uncle Titus rubbed his knees. “Besides, Catherine and Julius had been at odds with Angela. They

didn't even invite her to their wedding. So Mathilda and I decided to give you—and I suppose us—a little more time and delay the meeting with the Abernathys indefinitely.”

“Pretty much forever,” growled Jupiter.

“We were never sure when would be the best time to tell you about this, so eventually we just let things be...” Titus cleared his throat.

Bootsie stood up. “I’ll just get something from the house.”

“I’m very sorry,” Uncle Titus said sincerely, “but we just wanted to protect you and give you a carefree childhood.”

“It’s all right,” Jupiter said and that wasn’t a lie. Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus had given him the best home he could imagine. Jupiter couldn’t really be angry with them.

“So, here I am again.” Bootsie put a small briefcase on the table. “This is from Percy for you, Jupiter. He said to send you wishes from him and Mercury.”

Jupiter opened the briefcase and looked at a row of photo albums and odds and ends—all things from his mother’s youth.

Jupiter picked up a faded photo. It showed Catherine and her sister Caroline. They were both laughing into the camera and wearing necklaces with star pendants—identical except for the small stone. Catherine’s stone was green—an emerald... just as Jupiter remembered. Caroline wore a sapphire, so the First Investigator had indeed found his aunt’s necklace in Leland’s Jeep. She had left her necklace to Mercury and she in turn had lost it in the car. It all fitted together now.

“Thank you,” Jupiter said. He closed the briefcase. “I think that closes the case.”

Uncle Titus scratched his head. “Well... I guess so.”

“All right, then.” Bootsie pointed to his dog. “Bella and I are about to make our rounds. We need to take a message to Clementine once again. The woman needs to be brought back on the path of virtue.”

“Take care,” Jupiter said as he waved goodbye. Now he was looking forward to going back to Rocky Beach and spending the rest of the summer holidays there with Pete and Bob.